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WIDE AWAKE

A COMPLETE STORY **WEEKLY**. EVERY WEEK.

HOOK, LADDER AND PIKE;
OR THE LIFE SAVERS OF FREEHOLD. *By* ROBERT LENNOX.



"Run for your very lives!" roared Foreman Benson, leading the mad flight. Crash! Down came the walls, sending up a volcano of flame and stifling fumes. "I won't desert a helpless comrade!" gritted Tip Marston. The fiery avalanche caught them both.

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HOOK, LADDER AND PIKE

OR,

THE LIFE-SAVERS OF FREEHOLD

By ROBERT LENNOX

CHAPTER I.

WHEN THE MEN WENT AWAY.

"It'll be kinder tough, Mr. Mayor, if we can't go away," pleaded big, brawny Joe Lantry.

He was foreman of Drench No. 1, which company comprised a hand engine and a hook and ladder truck, all there was of the fire department of the little town of Freehold.

"I know you men want to go," hesitated the Mayor.

"Of course we do," broke in Foreman Lantry, eagerly. "All work and no play tires a fellow out. Here's the big Firemen's Fair and Parade coming off at Montclair, and all my fellows have been 'lotting' on going for the last month."

"I'd like to see you go, too," protested the Mayor, uneasily.

"You've only got to say the one word of permit, Mr. Mayor, and off we go," affirmed the big foreman.

"But don't you understand, Joe Lantry——"

"Of course, Mr. Mayor, I understand that there may be a fire while we're gone. But, Lord save us, Mr. Mayor, there are men enough in this town to put out any fire that gets started. And remember, Mr. Mayor, we're a volunteer fire department. We don't get paid for our services, but just the same we turn out winter and summer, good weather and bad, night or day, and risk our lives a dozen times a year."

There were loud murmurs from the two dozen men of

the hook and ladder company who stood banked behind big Joe.

"I know you ought to have the trip," agreed the Mayor.

"Then why don't you give it to us?" almost shouted one of the volunteer firemen from the back of the group.

"If only you could fix it so that half of you go, while the other half remain at home——" began the Mayor, thinking he saw his way out of the fix.

But big Joe gave a positive, well-nigh angry shake of his head.

"That won't do, either, Mr. Mayor. We've talked that all over, dozens of times. Either all of us go, or all of us stay at home."

"Would you be any better off with us away than if we stayed at home and disbanded?" called one hot-tempered man from the rear of the fire company.

But big Joe wheeled upon that speaker, his eyes glowing at the kicker.

"I reckon we want less talking in the ranks," remarked Joe, significantly.

"You see, men," explained the Mayor, "it isn't what I want, or what the people of the town want, either. The citizens of Freehold are all your neighbors, and they all appreciate what you do for their safety the year around. As far as the folks of this town go, they'd say to let you go, and they'd take the chances."

"Then what's to hinder, Mr. Mayor?" insisted big Joe.

"The insurance companies."

"The fire insurance companies be blowed!" uttered Joe

Lantry, explosively. "They don't pay us anything, and they don't own us. We're not bound to give up everything in life to please the fire insurance companies."

Joe said this with the positiveness of one who would not be disputed.

From all around there were murmurs of eager approval.

The Mayor, about to open his mouth, paused and mopped his forehead.

It was hot, anyway.

It was just about at the close of what had been a very hot summer day.

The people in this little group, which had swelled until it numbered about a hundred in all, had had their suppers and were out in the last few minutes of summer daylight in search either of cool or excitement—whichever offered.

At this present moment it was plain enough that all the crowd were on the side of the men of Drench One, who wanted to get away for a week to a big meeting of firemen at Montclair, fifty miles away.

"I hear all you say, and it's right, too," pleaded the Mayor, looking big Joe full in the eyes. "Yet listen to the other side as well. Suppose there's a real fire or two while you're away? Of course, there may be men enough to put it out. But suppose they fail and a goodly building is gutted? The owner 'll want his insurance, won't he? Now, what would the companies say? They'd say they had given this town a low rate on fire insurance because we maintained here a trained volunteer fire department. The fire insurance people might say, further, that as the town had allowed all the firemen to go out of town the companies were not obliged to pay the insurance money. That's the law, Joe Lantry, and just because you fellows were away the companies could get out of paying a blessed cent of insurance. That'd be tough enough in the case of one building burning down. But what would it mean if a fire swept away the buildings on our business street, and there was not a cent to be paid on the losses of all our business men?"

Now a murmur of a different kind ran around, for the business men who were present in the crowd saw the force of that argument.

"We don't want to risk having the town ruined," murmured one to another.

"I see the point," muttered big Joe, disgustedly.

The Mayor again mopped his perspiring brow.

"Fellows," announced Joe Lantry, "I guess all the firemen's fair we'll see will be held in the little shanty right back of you."

Freehold's firemen turned and glared sulkily at the trim little house behind them, in which rested the hand engine, Drench No. 1, and its companion, the hook and ladder truck.

At one side of the crowd a dozen lads between fifteen and eighteen had been doing some talking in undertones.

Now one of them stepped boldly forward.

Ted Benson was anything but a swaggerer, but he was

a boy who knew his own mind, and he was prepared to speak it.

This was one of the times.

As he stepped forward the other boys crowded close around him, but their glances were mostly on the Mayor.

Ted Benson presented a strong picture of self-reliant, manly, honest and fearless youth as he stepped forward at the head of his fellows.

He was seventeen, the son of the keeper of the local livery stable.

As the people of Freehold were not over-given to hiring horses, Ted's parents were very far, indeed, from being wealthy.

Ted was in the High School at present.

In another year, when he graduated, it remained for him to show whether he was equal to working himself through college.

Ted was of slender build, as a boy of seventeen should be.

Yet there was depth to his chest, strength in his limbs, and a fair broadness in his shoulders that betokened the promising young athlete.

He was, in fact, captain this summer of the Freehold nine, as he had been captain, the winter before, of the High School football team.

Light-haired, almost to the color of tow, Ted's ruddy, healthy skin and clear, light-blue eyes made him look the picture of health.

While not exactly a handsome boy, as the word is used, he was fine-looking.

Almost at his side, as our hero stepped forward, was Tip Marston.

Tip, who was also seventeen, was about as dark as Ted was fair.

The two boys contrasted well when together, which was about all the time.

They were known as "Damon and Pythias" on account of their fast friendship for each other.

It was jokingly said that Tip, who was more cut out for a business life, would try to work through college, too, simply because Ted was headed that way.

At this moment, from the looks that the other boys fastened on the Mayor's face, it would seem plain that Ted had been delegated to act as their spokesman.

"Mr. Mayor," began Ted, respectfully, "can I have the floor for just a minute?"

"Certainly. Of course," nodded Mayor Scott.

"Well, sir, we'd like to see the crew of Drench One get away to their good time."

"And so would I, Ted—no one more than I."

"And all that seems to be keeping them back, sir, seems to be that there is no fire company to take their place."

"Exactly," murmured bothered Mr. Scott.

"Then, Mr. Mayor, on behalf of my friends, I have to propose that we boys of Freehold will organize a hook and ladder company right on the spot."

"What! Schoolboys!" gasped the Mayor.

"Yes, sir."

"But——"

"There's no law against boys making up a fire company, is there, Mr. Mayor?"

"No-o-o, I believe not. But——"

"And Joe Lantry will tell you, sir," went on Ted, interrupting the speech of the City Father, so eager was the boy to press his plan, "he'll tell you that at every fire lots of us fellows have given a good, strong hand and some good service."

"That's so," nodded Joe, quickly.

"In fact, Mr. Mayor," went on Ted, "I believe that I can claim, without bragging, that there are many of us who can truthfully say that we're good junior firemen."

"That's so—by the great horn spoon!" declared Joe Lantry, approvingly.

At that there was a yell from the fire crew, followed by a cheer.

Ted, a born leader, was swift to follow up this advantage.

"So you will see, Mr. Mayor, that you can allow the young men of the town to organize a hook and ladder company, and that the fire insurance people will simply have to be satisfied."

"There you are, Mr. Mayor," endorsed big Joe, heartily.

A good many nodding, murmuring approvals were heard in the crowd.

There were many people in Freehold who had good cause to know what Ted Benson could accomplish when he set his heart to it.

"Mr. Mayor," broke in an excited, almost trembling voice from the outskirts of the crowd, "I have the honor to propose that I myself will raise and command a fire company of boys for one week!"

"Who's that?" demanded some one who could not see the speaker from where he stood.

The query was heard by all present. So was the answer: "George Snyder!"

At that announcement there was a round of laughter, in which nearly half of those present indulged.

Several of the boys behind Ted joined in the laugh.

George Snyder, a tall, rather slim boy of eighteen, well dressed and almost foppish-looking, had started to press his way through the crowd.

Now, at the sound of the laughter which the mention of his name caused, Snyder halted, his dark eyes flashing angrily.

"Well," he demanded, looking haughtily around, "isn't my proposal in line with the scheme that is being discussed?"

"But you didn't get up the scheme!" shouted one boy.

"You're stealing Ted Benson's thunder!"

"Go and think up something that's original with yourself!"

"Go home and soak your head!"

"Yes—in coal oil, and then touch a match to it!"

"Think up something for yourself!"

"Don't steal other people's brains!"

"Don't try to hog all the glory, either!"

George Snyder looked angry and humiliated, as indeed he was, until one of his friends—for Snyder had his friends in town—called out:

"Say, what's the matter with George?"

"He's all right!" came back a hearty chorus from young Snyder's friends.

There was a pause, broken, in another second, by a voice slightly tinged with brogue, which broke in:

"From his feet down—that is!"

At that there was another laugh, followed by derisive yells that made George Snyder's face turn scarlet.

Yet George tried to swallow the choke that Denny Burke's derision had brought to his voice.

"Mr. Mayor," insisted Snyder, with what pompousness he could, "I am waiting for your answer to my proposition."

"Thin—all together wid yez!" hailed Denny.

"We—don't—want—Snyder!" came the slow, regular, dinned-out chorus.

Snyder flushed yet more deeply and stood glaring around him.

"Then whom do you want?" asked Mayor Scott.

Back came the answer, in a torrent of sound:

"Ted Benson!"

At that the cheering started up again, big Joe Lantry leading in it as he strode forward, clapping one heavy hand on our hero's shoulder.

"The Benson men seem to have it," proclaimed Mayor Scott, as soon as he could make himself heard.

"Then you accept our proposition for a boy's fire company for one week, sir?" hailed Ted, delightedly.

"For one week—yes," nodded Mayor Scott. "It seems to be the best possible way of giving the men the chance they want."

Then there was cheering, indeed.

But George Snyder, having seen the wreck of his own daring hope, felt consumed with rage, disgust and mortification.

What could the boys find in Ted Benson to go "crazy" about?

Wasn't he (Snyder) the son of a man who, forty years ago, had owned acres and acres of land where the town now stood?

Hadn't old man Snyder made a fortune out of selling building lots that some ancestor had left him?

Weren't the Snyders, therefore, the real aristocrats of the town?

And George had been turned down in favor of the son of an "almost penniless hostler," as young Snyder termed Ted's father in his own mind.

It was galling. George Snyder felt almost suffocated as he pushed his way angrily through the crowd.

He went straight up to one of the prettiest visions of girlhood that had ever been seen on the streets of Freehold.

She was Della Foster, the daughter of a man who had made his snug fortune in Wall Street, and who now lived

on the outskirts of Freehold in a handsome colonial house.

Della, with her deep-brown hair, her sweet, laughing eyes, her pearly teeth in a rosebud of a mouth, her trim, dainty little figure, and all the surpassing qualities of beautiful girlhood, turned to George with sympathy showing in her eyes.

"Wouldn't that jar a statue?" growled George, as he lifted his hat on joining her.

"It was a great disappointment, of course," agreed the girl, sympathetically. "I'm very, very sorry, George, that they made so much fun of you."

"And in favor of such a—such a—young jackanapes!" ground out the disappointed candidate for honors.

"Oh, you don't quite mean that?" coaxed the girl.

"Who? Ted Benson? He's an upstart—a nobody—the son of a hostler," retorted George, explosively, as the two drew away from the crowd.

"Oh, now, you're unjust, George," reproved the pretty girl, mildly. "Ted Benson is really a fine young fellow in lots of ways."

"Huh!" sputtered Snyder.

"I remember last winter how noble he was when he plunged through into that air-hole out on the ice and brought Kitty Ford out to safety when no one else dared go in after her."

"Huh!" sneered George.

"Why, you were there yourself, and saw the splendid, heroic deed," urged Della.

"Huh!"

"And you didn't offer to go into the icy water after Kitty, either. I had hoped that you would."

George Snyder swore, but not loudly enough for Della to hear him.

The boys' fire company was formed that night—formed for one week, to serve as substitutes for the regular fire department.

Ted Benson was immediately elected foreman, while Tip Marston was just as promptly declared assistant foreman.

In all, twenty-four of Freehold's brightest boys were enrolled.

Denny Burke proudly carried off the honor of being chosen captain of the crew that drew the tub, as the hand engine was known, while Jack Preston was selected for the captaincy of the special crew that was to drag the hook and ladder truck in case an alarm came in.

The next day Ted Benson had his fire company out three times on false alarms.

But each time they went through their duties with a snap, zeal and vim that promised well if there should be need for their services.

On the day after all this drilling Joe Lantry and his firemen went away on the train.

That evening Ted Benson and every member of his company gathered at the fire-house, full of eagerness for duty if any call should come.

In their youthful enthusiasm they had already arrayed

themselves in such of the firemen's shirts and helmets as had been found to fit these younger firemen.

Ted, in fact, even had the foreman's trumpet in his hand, standing near the doorway, a little while before dark, when there came to their ears, from some distance, a muffled but tremendous—

Bang!

"What on earth is that?" gasped Tip, starting up.

"We'll know mighty soon, in case it's a fire," smiled Ted.

"Fires don't begin with a bang, do they?" laughed Jack Preston.

"Sometimes—when there's an explosion, for instance. But what are you fellows crowding around the door for? Back to the apparatus you run with, every one of you. Boys, we want to be ready to start on the second if an alarm really should——"

Ding-dong!

The clapper of the fire-alarm was really sounding.

"Whoop!"

All the pent-up enthusiasm of the youngsters was in that eager yell of joy.

"On the run, Drench One!" bellowed Ted.

He himself set the example by leaping across the sidewalk and into the street.

Whirr! clatter! jangle!

Drench 1, the old hand engine that had seen service, was right behind the young chief.

Close in the wake of the engine came the sturdy old hook and ladder truck, with which much of the best fire-fighting in Freehold had ever done.

There was no need to wait for the alarm to sound through.

Every one of them knew from about where the explosive sound had come.

That was clue enough to take them straight to the scene.

CHAPTER II.

THE FLAMES THAT MEANT DEATH.

Men and boys—and dogs—joined in the mad scamper as these young firemen of Freehold raced their hook and ladder apparatus through the streets.

They had nearly half a mile to go.

Yet, with so many willing hands pulling at the ropes, the apparatus was whirled along almost as swiftly as the boys could have sprinted there without a drag behind them.

As Ted, some yards in the lead, whirled around a corner and got a good look down the business street of the town, he understood where the fire was.

The fire was in a frame building at the further end of the business part of the town.

In that wooden building an eccentric character, an old man, known as "Old Joe Miller," lived and worked.

He called himself a chemist, but that was going beyond the truth.

Old Man Miller had invented a fairly good fireproof paint that he sold to farmers.

Here Joe worked and made the paint, and he was believed to be at work on another, better fireproof paint that he hoped the railway companies would buy of him.

Naturally, being a maker of fireproof paint, Old Man Miller had none on his own building.

Now, as Ted raced forward, he saw heavy, thick flames pouring out of the ramshackle building.

"We can't save that crazy old place!" he uttered. "We'll do well if we can save the business section from getting in flames. Whew! This is the fix Mayor Scott talked about before the regular fire company went away!"

It was, indeed.

Any slowness, any blundering, or any bad luck would doom the business section, the way the fire looked now.

"All the better!" quoth Ted to himself. "It puts us on our mettle at the outset, and we'll show the folks!"

Even as swiftly as the boys moved to the fire, there was a crowd there ahead of them.

"You'll have to drive the crowd back," panted Ted, to Chief of Police Brown, who was already on the scene, flanked by his one night policeman. "We've got to have all the room possible, Chief, for our work."

The police began to drive the people back, while Tip saw to the coupling of the hose with hydrant and engine, and the hook and ladder men got ready.

"Get on to the bars there, lively!" rang out Ted's sharp command. "Nozzlemen, throw the first stream right around the doorway! Don't waste a drop of water! Play away, Drench One!"

Then Ted turned to the Chief of Police.

"How did it start, Mr. Brown?"

"Blessed if I know. One man who was near here said the explosion sounded like one of gas."

"And Miller had a gas plant in his cellar," replied Ted, swiftly. "Perhaps there was a leak, and he went down there—with a light, of course—to look for the leak."

"That does sound natural," agreed the Chief of Police.

Jack Preston was now busy handing down the pikes, poles and axes.

"Come on, now, you hook and ladder men!" roared Ted's bellowing voice through the trumpet. "The 'tub' (engine) will do what it can, but this is a hook and ladder job of the first order. Get in there, Jack, with the hooks, poles, pikes and axes! Tear down everything that'll come down! No use trying to save this building, but we must save the others!"

He watched the boys sally in against the first fire that they had ever fought on their own account.

The stream was playing well, under good pressure, but the nozzlemen were all but blistered at such close range to the heat.

"Where's old Miller?" Ted suddenly demanded, turning to the chief.

"Don't know. Haven't seen him," replied that official.

"Yet the explosion came from the cellar?"

"Yes."

"Miller may be down there yet."

"Good heavens! Do you think so?"

"I'm not going to think," gritted Ted. "I'm going to know!"

"What——"

But the question was wasted, for Ted had darted forward to where Jack Preston was directing the fellows who had poles and pikes.

"Follow me, Jack, as far as you can. I want you to watch to see whether I succeed in getting back."

"What——"

But Jack's question met the same fate as had Chief Brown's, for Ted had once more sprung forward.

The people who were only looking on gave a gasp when they saw Ted dart through the flame-lit doorway.

But there was not, as yet, any danger of his clothes catching fire in this part of the building.

The barrels of oil and tubs of mixed paint that were blazing so furiously at the rear of the store were sending up all the smoke, making all the smudge and heat, and reflecting the red light that had seemed to fold itself around the young foreman as he dashed inside.

But the flames were thick and suffocating.

Ted had to hold his breath as, aided by the glow, he hastened to the open doorway of the cellar.

He was down there like a flash.

Down here, too, it was light, for oils and alcohol were burning toward the rear of the cellar.

Yet, by the flames, Ted saw the body of old Joe Miller lying there on the floor, not two yards from the line of fire.

Again holding his breath, Ted darted forward.

He gathered up the somewhat light form of the old inventor in his arms, lifted it, and wheeled around to escape.

As he did so, our hero saw the wrecked remains of the gas plant.

There could be no doubt that an explosion of gas had given the blaze its first start.

Probably the force of the explosion had torn the lamp from the old man's hands and had hurled it to a distance, causing it to explode.

But all this Ted guessed in a flash, now, for there was no time to stand gazing.

A sudden change in the air-currents through the burning building drove the flames down and thickened the smoke.

Left thus in the dark, and strangling in the smoke, despite his closed mouth and stilled breathing, Ted groped his way back to the cellar stairs.

His head began to swim, yet he held to the human burden in his arms.

Up on the next floor he made a dash in a straight line for the street door.

Watching Jack Preston saw him, and ran forward to guide his all but blinded young chief from the building.

As Ted staggered out a cheer went up from the spectators back of the police lines.

"Bully old Ted!"

"First rescue for the kids!"

"Who says the boy volunteers ain't all right?"

There were more cheers, amid which could be heard Tip Marston's voice calling:

"No time to rubber, fellows! Keep on pumping!"

Ted bore Old Man Miller straight to the fire lines.

"Here, some of you, take this old man and see that he's looked after," Benson directed briefly.

Then, as he felt himself relieved of his burden, he wheeled and ran back.

There stood Jack, again directing the fellows, who were working like beavers with pole and pike.

Jack seemed dizzy.

"Here, old fellow, you go back and boss the tub outfit," Ted ordered swiftly. "I'll bring Tip over here. He hasn't got a pair of lungs full of smoke."

The change in assistants was quickly made, but Jack, leaving the work of the pumping crew to Denny Burke, saw to it that the nozzle was kept turned at the points where the water could do the most good.

"Tip, that whole front wall can be pulled down almost at any moment now," shouted Ted in his chum's ear. "Get the fellows to trying it. With the walls down we'll have a sure thing on stopping the spread of the fire."

Valiantly polemen and pikemen sallied in, under Tip Marston's close direction.

It was too hot, as yet, for the axemen to be able to get in at close quarters.

Their time would come when the burning walls were down.

For two or three minutes the pikemen tugged at getting that front wall down.

They were greatly aided by the polemen.

Tom Gerald, working with Tip at the doorway, had just succeeded in starting a bit of the blazing framework over the door.

But the smoke pouring from inside proved too much for Tom.

Suddenly, without warning, Tom swooned and went down in the stifling air of the doorway.

Ah! The front wall was giving! Here it came—toppling!

"Run for your very lives!" roared Foreman Benson, himself leading the mad flight.

Crash! Down came the walls, sending up a volcano of flame and stifling fumes.

"I won't desert a helpless comrade!" gritted Tip Marston, wheeling and seizing Tom Gerald back of the shoulders.

The fiery avalanche caught them both.

Down came the blazing embers, but Tip squared his shoulders to keep them off of unconscious Tom's body.

Some one else was suddenly battling with the falling embers.

For Ted, seeing his chum's peril, had snatched a pole out of another fellow's hands and raced back, fencing off the blazing bits of wood for an instant.

Then tossing the pole back of him, Ted seized hold of Gerald, shouting:

"Off with him, on the rush!"

They got away.

Tip's shirt was blazing, but quick-eyed Jack Preston saw that, and for an instant the stream of hose played all over Tip's back.

They got away just before there came another crash, and the main portion of the front wall fell.

"It's time to drag the hose around and play against the wall of the next building now!" bellowed Ted through his trumpet.

He had not attempted to follow Tip and the unconscious Tom Gerald, for he knew that they would be well looked after now that they were out of the crowd.

Hardly had the stream began to play on the threatened next building than Ted led a few of the fellows in as close as they could go to the steam and the heat.

Here they worked hard at pulling over the walls of the end of the blazing building.

This they soon succeeded in pulling over backward into the flames.

For a few minutes the stream was changed in its course so as to play over the new pile of embers.

Then back again the drench went on the burning next building.

At the time of the first fall of the walls there had been a ladder in place against old Miller's doomed shop.

This ladder had been dragged back out of the fire, and now Ted ordered it against the wall of the building that was now threatened.

"Up on the roof, two of you hook and ladder men!" roared directing Ted. "Others on the ladder! Let some of the crowd through the lines to pass buckets of water to the hook and ladder men!"

In a minute more a constant line of buckets was being passed up to the roof of that next building.

The young hook and ladder men worked like beavers, dripping more with perspiration than from the water they were passing.

Thanks to the work of these hook and ladder men that roof was soon most thoroughly drenched.

One final crash, and the rest of Miller's building was down.

From that on the work was easy, for the next building was now so thoroughly well drenched that there could be little chance for any of the flying sparks to catch.

Panting, perspiring, tired out, yet glowing with satisfaction, Ted Benson stood back to look at the fire and see if anything more could have been done.

"It's all right now, young fire chief!" sounded the friendly voice of Mayor Scott. "But I want to thank you and your company for a mighty swift, clever bit of work."

"It wasn't so hard," protested Ted.

"Wasn't, eh?" cried the Mayor, warming up. "You've had two men hurt, and you yourself risked your life getting old Joe out of that cellar."

"How are Tip and Tom?" asked Ted, in sudden concern.

For a few moments he had forgotten them.

"Oh, Tip is a bit blistered, but otherwise all right. The doctors are still working over Tom Gerald."

"Is it as bad as that?" choked our hero.

"Oh, they're going to bring Gerald through all right, I imagine. He has had his eyes open, but his lungs are so full of smoke that he has great trouble getting any air down there."

Tip, in fact, came back a few moments later to report for duty.

He had two small blisters on his back that smarted a good deal.

But for Jack Preston's prompt throw of water Tip might at least have been laid up for a few weeks.

"How's old Joe Miller?" asked Ted.

"Pretty bad, but they're not going to lose him," Tip wheezed.

The hard work of the fire was past now.

All that remained to be done was to play upon the embers of the burned building until the last glow of fire was extinguished.

Nothing could have saved Miller's building.

But the business part of the main street of the town was saved.

This was the first feather in the cap of Freehold's boy fire-fighters.

On the outskirts of the crowd the Foster carriage, containing Della and her mother, had halted.

"Mamma, I must see what the boys are doing—how they handle the fire," Della explained, and alighted.

George Snyder, on his bicycle, not far away at the time of the sounding of the alarm, had come quickly to the scene.

In his heart he devoutly hoped to see Ted Benson's crew make a fluke of the fire from beginning to end.

He saw Della and joined her. Together they watched the course of events.

"Benson is handling the whole thing like a muff," growled Snyder.

"Wait," urged Della.

Then she saw our hero come out, supported by Jack Preston, and carrying the limp form of the old man.

"That was splendidly done!" glowed the girl, her pulses quickening, for she loved heroism.

"Huh!" said George.

"And Marston, too—another hero!" cried the girl, a little later, as she saw Tip fighting for Tom Gerald's life.

"Huh!" sniffed Snyder.

"And there goes Benson back to save them both."

"Huh!"

And at length, when it was over, Snyder remarked:

"Well, of all the poor handling of a fire, I never saw the like of that!"

"Don't you feel well to-night, George?" asked the girl, looking at him queerly.

"Why—why?" stammered Snyder, reddening.

"Did you hear what that man said?" whispered Della.

"He said Mayor Scott had just thanked young Benson for the splendid way in which he had handled his first fire."

"Mayor Scott is——"

"George!"

"Let's get out of this," proposed Snyder, sulkily.

"We may as well," Della replied, a trifle coldly. "I know mamma must be tired of waiting for me all this time."

CHAPTER III.

TED IN A FEARFUL SCRAPE.

The next day the good people of Freehold had something to talk about that made the boys' fire-fight become instantly forgotten.

Della Foster had become a great heiress.

An eccentric old friend of her father's had died, leaving two million dollars and some very distant relatives.

One-half of his fortune he had left to Della, the other million going to the distant relatives.

"That's just the way it goes," growled a lot of the dissatisfied ones. "Those that have, get more. Those that don't happen to have anything don't get anything left to them, either."

Nevertheless, Della was looked upon as being wonderfully lucky.

When she came down the street that afternoon, walking with George Snyder, the fortunate girl was stared at a good deal.

"It's easy to see who'll get the Foster girl's new million in the long run," remarked some, with sour looks at Snyder, who, truth to tell, was twice as devoted to the girl as usual on this bright summer afternoon.

But Della herself did not seem to take the news to the point of growing excited over it.

She laughed and chatted as naturally as ever with her escort, and seemed wholly unaware of the amount of curiosity she was exciting in the villagers.

"Oh, here comes Ted Benson!" murmured the girl. "I must stop and give him a pleasant word for the splendid way he handled last night's fire."

"Oh, I wouldn't bother with him!" urged George.

"Why, you don't seem to like Benson," observed Della, opening her eyes in some surprise.

"I don't," Snyder admitted candidly.

"I do, from what little I've heard of him and seen of him," returned the girl.

"That's because you don't know him as well as I do," Snyder returned meaningly.

"What do you mean by that, George Snyder?"

"I'll tell you some other time. He's getting too close now."

So Snyder remained mum as they came close to Ted, who had intended to pass with a lifting of his hat, until Della halted, smiling, and held out her hand.

"I want to congratulate you, Mr. Benson," she murmured.

"Me!" gasped Ted. "On what?"

"On the splendid way you and your fire company behaved last night. I was in the crowd and watched your work. It was splendid."

"I'm glad it pleased you, Miss Foster," Ted replied, flushing, for he knew that the eyes of many of the curious throng along the street were now turned on him.

"I saw that splendid rescue of yours," Della went on. "When I saw you come out, bearing that old man, I felt glad for you."

Snyder stood two or three paces off, scowling impatiently.

"Firemen have to do a lot of that sort of thing," Ted replied. "But no one ever thinks anything about it."

"I know I shall," smiled the girl, earnestly, and looking into Ted's eyes with a very friendly look in her own eyes.

She admired modesty as much as she did courage.

"Well, I hope everybody is satisfied with the way we did last night," Ted went on, feeling somewhat embarrassed, for it was the first time that he had ever stopped on the street to chat with Della Foster.

Then, by way of changing the subject, he said quickly:

"I have heard that you are to be congratulated, Miss Foster."

"On what?"

"Why—er—I understand that you have become an heiress."

"Oh, yes," laughed the girl. "Well, it will become time enough later on to get excited over that."

"Just the same, Miss Foster, I would like to be among those who do congratulate you most heartily on your good fortune."

"Thank you, Mr. Benson."

"I say, isn't it time we were going on?" broke in Snyder, impatiently.

"When I have finished speaking with Mr. Benson," replied Della, quietly.

Then, glancing up to see the scowl on George's face, she added:

"But don't let me detain you, Mr. Snyder, if you wish to go along."

Someone hiding behind a nearby shutter tittered at that, and Snyder grew furiously red.

Della, too, colored slightly, whereat Ted, feeling that the situation might quickly become uncomfortable, raised his hat, saying:

"I thank you again for your kind words, Miss Foster. Good afternoon."

Della nodded pleasantly, then turned to resume her stroll with George Snyder.

By the next morning Freehold had another sensation.

A later will of the dead Mr. Eastman had been found.

Under this later will Della did not receive any bequest. All the money of the dead millionaire went to the distant relatives.

This second will had been found in the safe of a lawyer who had done some business for the late Mr. Eastman.

The will had not been opened, but, sealed in its envelope, had been forwarded to the office of Lawyer Southcomb in Freehold.

Mr. Southcomb was to open the will in probate court and offer it for filing.

"So Della Foster doesn't get that million, after all!" was the new word that floated around the gossipy town.

"Well, small loss it'll mean to her. She didn't need the money, anyway."

Della, of course, heard this second bit of news.

Yet no one would have been able to discover that it interested her any.

As the day was fine she chose to walk down to the post-office for the mail, instead of sending one of the men-servants.

George Snyder, watching for her, as he often did, fell in at her side, the two strolling into town together.

"To-days's news is very unpleasant, Della," remarked Snyder, sympathetically.

"It hasn't spoiled my joy in living," laughed the girl, lightly.

"But it won't change the feelings of any of your friends toward you," the young fellow went on, with a clumsy attempt at being sentimental.

"Of course it won't," cried the girl. "Why should it?"

"But it's such—such a stunning blow—it must be," stumbled on Snyder, confusedly.

"Stunning?" asked the girl. "Why, not in the least. Yesterday, I supposed that I was heiress to a million dollars that I'll never need. To-day I learn that a later will has been found, and that I'm not an heiress at all."

"But it certainly is too bad to lose such an awfully big lump of money," muttered Snyder.

"It might be to some people," replied the girl, unconcernedly. "To me it doesn't seem at all like bad luck."

Snyder looked at her out of the corner of his eye.

He thought, surely, that she must be trying to "bluff" him.

But Della was quite honest in what she said.

Never having had to worry in the least about money, she was quite unconcerned as to whether she was an heiress or not.

"Look at that crowd on the sidewalk farther down the street," muttered George, suddenly.

"What are they looking at?" asked Della.

"Why, they're looking up at Lawyer Southcomb's window."

"Why?"

"Oh, it's just a sort of fool curiosity, I suppose," sighed Snyder. "They know that Southcomb is up there in his office, and that he has the will that cuts you out of that million."

"Is that all a silly crowd can find to look at?" asked Della with laughing, quiet scorn.

But the crowd that stared up at Lawyer Southcomb's win-

dows was composed of more than fifty people, and others were still joining the group.

Some gossiping people, more "nervy" than the rest, had gone up into the lawyer's office, on a pretence of business, and sat there waiting to see him.

There were seven or eight of these extra-curious ones, in addition to the lawyer, his clerk and his office-boy.

Southcomb, a quiet, middle-aged man, knew well enough why these people had invaded his office.

He had the will before him on his desk, simply sealed in a plain long envelope.

There were other envelopes on the desk that looked just about the same.

But Southcomb sat back, looking over one of his books and paying no heed to the curious ones.

At last, laying down the book, he rose and went to the window.

Looking down directly beneath him, he saw Ted Benson passing on the sidewalk.

"Oh, Benson!" called the lawyer, suddenly thinking of something.

"Yes?" asked Ted, looking up.

"Are you going by Page's grocery store?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you mind coming up a moment?"

Ted came up quickly enough, halting beside the lawyer's desk.

"I've been drawing up a lease for Page," explained the lawyer in a low voice. "He wants to look over it. As you're going by, will you just drop into his store and hand it to him?"

"Certainly," replied obliging Ted.

"I'll be ever so grateful to you," went on the lawyer.

He reached out for the envelope.

But two of the waiting people in the room, unable to hear the lawyer's low voice, rose and came forward on tiptoe, their curiosity overcoming their last remaining good sense.

Lawyer Southcomb turned to them with a scowl as his fingers closed upon the envelope.

"Here it is, Benson," murmured the lawyer, handing out the envelope that he had picked up without looking at it. "And I'll be greatly obliged."

"You're very welcome," murmured Ted, dropping the envelope into an outer jacket pocket.

Then he turned and left the room quickly.

Page's store being on the other side of the street, Ted crossed as he came down from the lawyer's office.

"Hullo, Ted!" hailed some one. "What did he have to say?"

"Who?" asked Ted, without stopping.

"Why, Lawyer Southcomb, of course. What did he say?"

"Seems to me you had better go and ask him," smiled Ted back over his shoulder.

There were several grunts from the dissatisfied ones as Ted made his way through the crowd.

As he left the crowd behind he saw Della Foster and George Snyder ahead up the street.

A dozen more steps our hero had gone, when Lawyer Southcomb burst into the street, moving about as fast as his long legs would carry him.

"Ted! Ted Benson!" shouted the lawyer hoarsely, as he cut diagonally across the street.

Ted halted, in some surprise.

And the crowd, scenting the fact that something was up, came rushing along.

"Give me back that envelope!" panted the lawyer, as he caught up with our hero. "I—I gave you the wrong one."

Ted's hand shot to his side pocket.

Then a look of dismay came into his face.

"Give it to me!" insisted the lawyer.

"I—I haven't got it!" faltered Ted, who, after looking at both of his jacket side pockets, discovered that both were empty.

To Ted's own amazement, and to the throbbing, wild excitement of the crowd, Lawyer Southcomb caught the boy by the throat.

"Don't you try to tell me that, boy!" raged the lawyer, taking a strangling grip and holding on for all he was worth. "Give me that envelope this minute, or you'll wish you had!"

But Ted, unused to being handled in this sort of fashion, began to get his own dander up.

With a wrench he twisted himself free of the lawyer's clutch.

Then, as the excited man tried to get a new hold, Ted, dodging him, flared back:

"Careful, sir—or I shall feel bound to knock your head off!"

"Don't you threaten! Don't you bluster!" warned the lawyer. "Give me that envelope and what it contained."

"But I can't find it," protested Ted. "I thought I had it in my side pocket. It isn't there."

"Let me search you, then!" raged the white-faced lawyer.

"You're forgetting yourself, Mr. Southcomb!" vented the boy.

"Am I?" raged the man of law. "Perhaps I am. The envelope that I handed you by mistake contained the latest Eastman will!"

There it was! The crowd had its fill of excitement now, and gasped with the new thrill that was in the air.

"The Eastman will?" quaked Ted.

"Yes! Let me search you, you young scoundrel!"

"Take back that word, and I will let you search me," blazed Ted.

"I—I take it back," choked the lawyer.

"Then, if you suspect me of anything like trying to make off with a will, go ahead and search me!" quavered the boy, indignantly.

He threw his jacket wide open and stood up before the lawyer, white, but not shaking.

Swiftly the lawyer's fingers flew over the boy's clothing.

Snyder and Della had come upon the scene and stood looking on in astonishment.

"I can't find it," wailed the lawyer. "Oh, Benson! Benson! Tell me what you did with it!"

"I lost it, from all appearance," muttered Ted. "It was in my side pocket when I left your office. But you told me it was Page's lease."

"And I thought that was the envelope I had given you," panted the white and trembling lawyer.

"Then it must have dropped out of my pocket between your door and here," suggested puzzled Ted.

But a dozen eager searchers had already run back over the short route, and word came that the envelope could not be found.

"Benson," flared the lawyer, whose face had grown ashen in the last few moments, "I'll make you a heap of trouble if you don't instantly turn over that document."

"I've told you already, and I tell you again," blazed Ted, "that I haven't the least notion where your old envelope is. And I'm mighty sorry that I agreed to do you a favor."

"But that will? There are millions at stake!" panted the lawyer desperately.

"Find it, if you want it!" flared Ted, stung by these accusations.

"What's up?" asked Snyder, in a low voice, of the man who stood nearest to him and Della.

In eager sentences the man told what had happened, then left them, pressing forward closer into the crowd.

"That fellow, Benson, is playing a desperate game," sneered Snyder.

"What do you mean by a game?" asked Della, anxiously.

"Why, in doing away with the new will, or hiding it."

"But he says he didn't do anything of the sort," contended Della.

"Oh, of course he says so," jeered Snyder.

"What object could he have in doing anything wrong?" demanded Della.

"Why, girl, don't you understand that, if the new will is gone for good, then the old will holds?"

"Well?"

"And, in that case, you'll get the million that you lost under the new will?"

"But what influence could that have on Ted Benson?"

"Why, Della, don't you see? You noticed the young booby yesterday, and it has turned his head. He gets a chance to do a sneak trick and help you. Of course you'll be grateful—as grateful as Ted Benson expects. And of course you'll reward him for saving your million for you! Heaven only knows how far the young booby expects your gratitude to go!"

Della flushed, whitened out, then became dizzy for an instant.

"George," she demanded, angrily, "are you parting with your senses?"

But in the meantime, Lawyer Southcomb was saying hotly:

"Benson, for the last time, either you turn over that missing will, or I shall go to court on the jump and get out a warrant for your arrest!"

CHAPTER IV.

"YOU THIEF OF A MILLION!"

"But I tell you," protested dumbfounded Ted, "that I honestly don't know where your envelope is, and honestly don't know how or where I lost it."

"Then I'll get the warrant out for you," quavered the lawyer. "There's no use in wasting time with a thief."

"What's that?" cried Ted, starting forward under the smart of this taunt.

"Well?" quivered the lawyer.

"You called me a thief, I believe?" retorted Ted.

"I did! You thief of a million! A million that belongs to other people you never even saw!"

"Come," said Ted, crisply, wheeling.

The lawyer eyed the boy in astonishment.

"What do you mean, Benson? Where are you going?"

He clutched at the boy's sleeve, nor did our hero attempt to shake him off.

"Where are you going?" repeated the lawyer.

"To court," said Ted tersely.

"You? To court? What for?"

"To be on hand when you get that warrant!"

Ted's eyes were flashing now.

There was a hard, resolute look around his mouth that was not pleasant to see.

"See here, Benson," whined the lawyer, "if you'd only use me right——"

"Stop that baby talk!" cried Ted, indignantly. "It's you who've got to use me right now. You've called me a thief before all this crowd. Now, you've got to prove it or—well, I believe there's a law that provides a punishment for slander, isn't there?"

"Don't talk law to me," sneered Mr. Southcomb.

"Some lawyers don't like law, except when they can bluster other people with it," retorted the boy. "Now, then, I'm ready to go to court. Are you?"

"No," said Lawyer Southcomb, shortly, as he turned away. "I'm going to take time to think out my plan."

"And so will I," Ted called after him as the lawyer started away. "I'm too hot to think out the right plan now."

With that the boy turned, making his way homeward.

"Good boy, Ted!"

"Sock it to him!"

That cheering advice came to him from the juvenile part of the crowd.

The older people did not speak their minds until both lawyer and young fireman were out of ear-shot.

Ted did not happen to see Della and Snyder in the crowd as he started hurriedly homeward.

"If that Benson boy is trying to fool the lawyer, he's

doing it well. That's all I've got to say," remarked one man.

"Oh, Southcomb ain't the one to play with," retorted another. "He's too sharp a lawyer for any boy to play with."

"But do you think Ted really tried to get away with the will, in some fashion?"

"Sure!" retorted one.

"No, he didn't," disputed someone else. "There isn't a crooked bone in Ted's whole body."

The sentiment of most of the crowd was in favor of Ted Benson.

Yet there were those who believed the lawyer's charge to be true.

A few there were who took still another view of the matter.

"Well," remarked some one, "if Benson really did do that trick, and knew what he was doing, he kept that odd million in this town at any rate."

Della, who was just turning to go away, heard the remark.

Like a flash she wheeled, eying the speaker, coldly.

"Shame!" she uttered, then walked straight onward.

Snyder kept at her side, whispering as soon as they were out of ear-shot:

"Della, for heaven's sake, don't take any sides in this affair," he begged.

"Why not?" flashed the girl. "Should I hear Ted Benson slandered, and accused of doing a mean trick on my account?"

"Why, folks will say you're standing up for Benson because he did a slick trick for you," suggested Snyder, artfully.

Della gazed at her escort with fire in her eyes.

"George, do you really believe that Ted Benson did any such thing?"

Snyder might have replied quickly, but he caught the look in her eyes, and was warned not to go too far.

"I don't know what to think," he answered, slowly. "What's your idea of it all, Della?"

"My idea? Why, it's simple enough. Ted Benson was given a sealed envelope in the lawyer's office. He didn't stop to look at it, but hurried right down the stairs and across the street. He had no time to open the envelope, or to do anything with it before Mr. Southcomb caught up with him. He simply lost it out of his pocket, and that's all there was to it."

"But it was such a queer way to lose it, in so short a space of time," murmured young Snyder.

"George, do you mean to say that Benson did anything wrong?" asked the girl, stiffly.

Again Snyder decided that it was a good time to trim sail.

"I don't know what to think. I want to think it over and see what comes out of it all."

"George," observed the girl, "just bear in mind that a thief doesn't go in the same body with the young hero

whom we saw bring a helpless old man out of the flames last night."

George Snyder, despite his father's wealth, and his own feeling that he was "solid" with this charming girl, felt a thrill of jealousy go through him.

"Anyway, Della," he hinted, after a moment's pause, "your interests seem to be safe."

"Now, what do you mean?"

"Why, girl, if the new, the later will, has vanished, then you're safe and secure in that million after all."

Della Foster shot a keen, swift glance at her escort.

"George, do you think I'd glory in getting money through any dishonest trick?"

"Why, if there has been dishonesty, it wasn't yours, was it?"

"No, but——"

"And you get the million now."

"I'm afraid, George, that you and I can't quite understand each other's ideas of honesty. If I really thought that Ted Benson had that new will, or knew where it could be found, I'd go to him and urge him to give it back to Mr. Southcomb."

"You would?"

George's mouth was agape with amazement.

But, for once, he had the good sense to keep his tongue between his teeth, and they walked on in silence for some moments.

"Della," he said, at last, "you're a great girl!"

Which closed the matter as safely as it could be closed.

In the meantime Ted, with cheeks that still burned, went home and talked the matter over with his father and mother.

His parents, knowing the wholly truthful character of the boy, accepted his account of the matter at once.

"Just keep cool, Ted," advised his father. "It'll come all right after a while."

"But I ought to make Southcomb smart for what he said before all that crowd."

"When he has had time to think it over, lad, I guess you'll find that Lawyer Southcomb will be willing to apologize to you. Remember, as he looked at the case, he had pretty good reason for feeling hot."

"And so have I," quivered our hero.

"Then don't do anything, or say much, lad, until you've had time to cool off," was his father's mild but sensible advice.

After dinner, with the long summer afternoon before him, Ted wandered out to the livery stable behind the house.

"Dad," he called back, "there are two buggies and some harnesses that need washing."

"I know that," his father answered, from a distance.

"I'll clean them, then. Might as well be doing something."

"Go ahead, then."

Yet, first of all, Ted stepped in and bridled and saddled the one saddle-horse that the stable contained.

This horse, a gray mare, he led outside and tied at the corner of the stable doorway.

Next he came out with an armful of hay, which he dumped at the mare's forefeet.

"If an alarm of fire should come in," he mumbled, "I'll be ready to jump for it."

Then, after rolling up his sleeves and fastening on a long rubber apron, he ran out the buggies, and proceeded with his work.

He was engaged in this fashion when Tip Marston arrived.

Tip had just heard of the happening of the morning, and was eager to discuss it with his chum.

But he, too, took a mild view of the advisability of prosecuting Southcomb.

"He was just naturally mad, and, under the circumstances, you can hardly blame him, Ted. Wait until Mr. Southcomb has had time to cool off."

"Instead of that," smiled the boy, "Southcomb may just be getting madder and madder, and he may get that warrant for me before the afternoon is over."

"If he does," answered Tip, solemnly, "he'll know where to find you. That's a cinch he wouldn't have with some folks."

Tip got a piece of harness and a sponge, and pitched in to help.

Della Foster, after luncheon that afternoon, ordered her saddle-horse and went off at a canter.

It was her intention to find Ted, if possible, and express her sympathy for the trouble into which he had gotten on her account.

George Snyder, always watching for a chance to go abroad with Della, had guessed that a saddle ride might be on the girl's afternoon programme.

His own horse, therefore, a new and rather fiery mount, was saddled and waiting in the stable.

Leaping into saddle, Snyder was quickly riding at the side of his sweetheart.

"You can't guess where I'm going," hinted the girl.

"Won't have to guess, if you'll tell me," he replied.

"I'm going to try to find Ted Benson."

"What?"

George's jaw fell instantly.

"What do you want to see that fellow for, if I may ask?" he queried.

Della explained.

"All right," he sighed, but gritted his teeth when he had finished speaking.

"If Della keeps on showing so much attention to that clod-hopper," flushed Snyder, angrily, "she'll turn his head—sure!"

Della elected, first of all, to go to Ted's home.

And there, as she drew near, she espied both boys, in their rubber aprons hard at work.

"There's a good thing for you to ponder about, George," smiled the girl, in an undertone, as they slowed their horses down to a walk.

"What?" quizzed her admirer.

"Just what those men are doing."

"And what is that?"

"Honest, manly work," replied Della, coolly. "George, did you ever do any honest, manly work?"

"Well—er—er—not exactly the kind they're doing," replied Snyder, disdainfully. "That kind of work is for hostlers, not for gentlemen!"

"Oh," said Della, very drily.

"Della, you're the queerest kind of a girl!"

"Am I? Just because I think that all men ought to be brave, honest and fond of work?"

Snyder was wise enough to answer only by a laugh.

But he thought to himself:

"What on earth is getting into this dear girl? For the last two or three days she's been as contrary as a mule."

Ted, when he looked up and realized that Miss Della was really riding into the stable yard, felt a sudden pounding at the heart.

First, he turned pale, then rapidly reddened.

His first impulse was to tear off that old rubber apron.

But he suddenly recollected that the clothes under the apron were not much better looking.

"Don't take off that apron, please, Mr. Benson!" Della called, laughingly. "If you do, I shan't enjoy my visit half as much."

"Visit!"

That word made Ted's pulses jump.

Della Foster paying him a visit—and in the stable yard!

But the girl's easy manner, as she rode up and drew rein, put our hero quickly more at ease.

"Don't make any trouble on our account," begged the girl, bending forward and offering a gloved hand.

"Can't," muttered Ted, shamefacedly, as he looked at his own hand, streaked with mud from the buggy-washing.

Della laughed and drew her hand back.

"Consider that we've shaken hands, won't you, Mr. Benson? And you too, Mr. Marston?"

Then, noting that George had halted a few paces back and showed no disposition to be sociable, she added laughingly:

"As for Mr. Snyder, I must explain that he isn't yet old enough to know how to shake hands. He's still in the nursery, you know. He'll be coming out next year."

Which jibe caused Snyder to turn quite red in the face. He bit his lips in silent anger.

"What I came especially for, Mr. Benson," Della went on, more seriously, "was to express my regret that, even partly on my account, you should have been mixed up in such a disagreeable scene as that of this morning. Of course, I hadn't really anything to do with it, but I feel very sorry that my name should have even any part in your annoyance."

"It won't annoy me a bit, Miss Foster," Ted answered, quickly, "if you don't believe the absurd idea that I'd de-

liberately steal legal papers like those, or have any hand in destroying them."

"Of course I don't believe that," replied the girl, warmly. "If I did, I wouldn't be here."

"Tip tells me that some mean people are saying that I did something with the papers just to curry favor with you, Miss Foster."

"Then they don't know either of us, do they, Mr. Benson?" asked Della, flushing a little. "Why, if I thought you knew anything at all about that will, I'd beg you to help Mr. Southcomb by telling him the truth."

"I know you would, Miss Foster."

Then from that they chatted of other little matters.

Miss Della, though she did not dismount, looked about the stable yard quite a bit, and asked Ted many questions.

George Snyder, in the meantime, sat in saddle some distance away.

Two or three times he hemmed and hawed, wheeling his fretsome horse around.

But to him Della paid no heed just then.

"Oh, I say, Miss Foster," called the scowling escort, at last, "we don't want to spend all afternoon here, do we?"

To emphasize his displeasure, Snyder brought his riding whip savagely down on the flanks of that unruly mount of his.

The horse plunged and reared.

Then, like a streak out of the yard it shot.

George Snyder, holding on frantically, and shouting hoarsely at the top of his voice, looked like anything but an expert horseman.

"Stop, you brute!" he screamed. "Oh, help! The beast is running away with me!"

Indeed, the last glimpse the young people had of the terrified Snyder, he was in momentary danger of being unhorsed and dashed to death.

"I'm afraid he'll be killed," cried Della, wheeling and urging her own horse away at a gallop.

But Ted Benson, taking all in swiftly, had snatched off that apron.

In another twinkling he was going out of the yard like a whirling Arab, urging his father's gray mare on to its best efforts.

CHAPTER V.

HOW TO LOSE A GIRL.

Just as he whirled out of the yard, and wheeled to the left, in the direction taken by Snyder's animal, Ted got sight of the chase.

Truly, Snyder's excited, chafing mount was travelling fast.

For the most part, it was only a cloud of dust that Ted saw.

But he knew his own gray mare perfectly.

Urging her on with voice and heels, Ted bent low and rode hard and fast.

Our hero caught up with Della, rode neck and neck with

her for only a couple of seconds, and then forged on ahead.

"Hold on, Snyder!" shouted the youngster. "I'll try to catch up with you. Don't let yourself get unhorsed."

Then the race began in earnest.

Had it been a real race, with each striving to distance the other, Snyder must have won in a romp, for his mount was far the better of the two.

But Ted was urging his animal for all the speed there was in it.

George Snyder, besides shouting frantically at his runaway brute, was making some scared, almost feeble efforts to slack it in.

Della Foster, though she rode well, was soon left well behind.

Ted, with his gaze only on the fugitive horse ahead, had the satisfaction of seeing that he was gradually overtaking it.

"Pull harder on your bridle, Snyder, and keep your head!" shouted Ted, but it is doubtful if the frightened youngster ahead heard or understood.

An automobile that came whizzing down the road was narrowly dodged by both young riders.

Della, having fallen more to the rear, had plenty of time to get out of the way of the auto.

"I believe I can overtake him," thought Ted. "That is, if the fellow doesn't get scared and jump. That'd kill him, sure!"

A foot at a time Ted and his gray mare gained on the frantic beast ahead.

"Try to pull in more on your reins!" bellowed Ted, in his loudest voice.

Soon he was ranging alongside.

But Snyder, his face white with fear, shrieked out:

"Keep away! Don't scare my horse any worse."

"Bosh!" muttered Ted, under his breath.

He tried to ride in so that the beasts would be shoulder to shoulder.

After a bit our hero succeeded.

Far over to the right he leaned.

Ted Benson's right arm shot out, passing around Snyder's shoulders.

"Come on, George! Don't struggle! Easy now!"

With a strong jerk Ted pulled the other squarely out of saddle and over the back of his own gray mare.

It had all been done in an instant.

Too-oot! toot!

Two hundreds yards ahead was the railroad crossing.

Snyder's late mount, still galloping wildly, raced upon the tracks just as the gates were closing.

Caught there, the animal dashed against the farther gate, then recoiled, snorting with fear.

In another twinkling the express had caught the luckless animal, throwing it a score of feet and killing it outright.

But Ted, the instant that he felt Snyder's weight before

him, spoke to his gray mare and brought her in, quivering.

"Slide to the ground, Snyder! There, you're all right, old fellow!"

Snyder, reaching his feet on the ground, had backed speedily away from the gray mare.

Staggering, for he was still trembling, George reached a stone-wall and sat down on it.

"Too bad about your horse," called Ted, still sitting in saddle, for he saw that the other youth was in condition to take care of himself.

"Huh!" Snyder muttered, weakly.

Della came up now, riding at an easy canter, and looking resolutely away from the mangled horse beyond.

"That was splendidly done, Ted Benson!" cried the girl, her cheeks glowing and her eyes flashing with the spirit of what she had seen.

"There was nothing very hard about it, Miss Foster," smiled our hero.

"Nothing but the presence of mind, perhaps—and the courage," returned the girl, drily.

"I think Mr. Snyder is able to take care of himself all right now," Ted went on, "so——"

Clang! The first note of an alarm from the bell on the distant fire house.

In an instant the whole look and attitude of the young fireman was changed.

"That calls me!" he cried, with one swift glance at Miss Foster.

Then, without even stopping to lift his hat, Ted Benson wheeled and galloped away, counting the alarm as he rode.

The box, seventeen, was located on one of the lesser side streets of Freehold, the box itself standing at the Main street corner with the smaller street.

"I wonder if there are fellows enough at the fire house?" thought the boy, as he rode. "There they go! Oh, gracious! Don't that sound good!"

To his ears there had come the jangling, clanging bell on old Drench One. That bell rang with every turn of the wheels. From the sound of the bell, even before he caught sight of the engine, Ted Benson knew that there were boys enough at the pole and the ropes to make the hand engine fly through the streets.

"They don't need me, then," breathed the young fire chief. "I'll ride straight ahead and see what the blaze is."

At a gallop Ted reached the corner where the box was located, the apparatus being yet some distance behind.

"Where's the fire?" shouted Ted, as he drew up and dismounted.

"Down in Mrs. Jenkins's kitchen," answered the man who had turned in the alarm.

"Hitch the mare, then, while I take a look."

Tossing the bridle to the man, Ted ran on until he reached the gate of the Jenkins yard.

Through that yard he streaked to the back door, where Mrs. Jenkins herself was standing.

"Be quick, or I'll lose my home!" screamed the woman.

"What happened?" Ted called out as he raced up to her. He could see smoke coming out of one of the kitchen windows.

"The gasoline stove exploded, when I wasn't in the kitchen."

Ted took a swift look inside.

Jangle! clash! ding! The apparatus was stopping at the gate.

"Hurry along a couple of axes!" bellowed Ted, making a trumpet of his hands. "And run the stream in here too."

Tip Marston and Jack were the first to reach him, the first bringing the axes, while the latter came, more slowly, with the hose.

"Quick, or the place'll burn up!" wailed Mrs. Jenkins.

"I think not," retorted Ted, coolly, as he jumped to catch the nozzle with Jack. "Play away, out there!"

A steady, swashing stream came through the hose as Ted and Jack ran the nozzle in through the kitchen door.

Then there came a spluttering, as dense clouds of steam rolled out through that one open window.

It had to be a stubborn fight for a few moments.

That kitchen was an addition to the main house, and Ted was determined to save the rest of the house.

Soon the flames were in check.

"Tip, you and one of the other fellows get in there with axes. We'll see if anything is smouldering in the walls."

"Don't chop the house down, boys!" cried the woman, excitedly, as the boys ran in.

Ted laughed by way of reply, then turned to his fellows.

Some of the charred wood, and some of the still glowing wood, were chopped away.

Another full minute with the hose pipe, and Ted turned to the woman.

"It's all out, Mrs. Jenkins. I don't believe the loss will be forty dollars. But, if you'd discovered it ten minutes later, you might have lost your home."

Feeling safe about her home, Mrs. Jenkins then did what so many other people will do. She found fault with the young firemen for the "muss" they had made.

"I'm sorry that we had to make so much dirty work here, Mrs. Jenkins," replied Ted, and turned away with a smile in his eyes.

Many people fail to realize how much they owe to the fire-fighters.

Yet, brief as their task had been, it had been quick work, and the afternoon was hot.

Ted, leading the gray mare, walked beside the hand engine as the young firemen drew it away.

Arrived at the corner and turned into Main Street, where the great trees cast a grateful shade, Ted gave the command to halt.

"You'd better stop here in the shade and rest a few minutes, fellows," announced the young fire chief. "I don't want any of you knocked out by heat, for we may need you at something bigger than this."

Of course, even so small a fire had drawn out a crowd,

and most of the crowd still followed the members of Drench One.

Now, with the halt, the crowd stopped, too, clustering on the sidewalk.

There were many sly looks at our hero. Many a word was whispered as to the disappearance of the will.

Suddenly one mischievous small boy at the back of the crowd piped out:

"Whatcher do with the million?"

There was a tittering laugh, next a craning of many necks as the crowd waited to hear what Ted Benson would say.

The young fire chief started slightly, looked swiftly for the one who had uttered the words, failed to locate him, then looked over the crowd with a slight flash in his eyes.

"My friends," he began, "that envelope containing the will was either dropped or snatched from my pocket this forenoon. I now believe that it was stolen. That is every bit I know about the affair. I hope you will believe me after this."

"Oh, you're all right, Ted!" cried a friendly voice from the crowd.

There was a ripple of applause at that.

Flushing a bit, Ted went on:

"Furthermore, my friends, believing that that important document was stolen from me, I mean to catch the thief and make him give up that will. This I shall do if there is any possible way of doing it."

Meanwhile, Della Foster, still sitting on her horse, was looking at George Snyder with an expression of some wonder.

"Are you hurt, George?" she asked, at last.

"No-o-o," replied that youth. "I guess not."

"Then what are you going to do about that unfortunate horse?"

"The railroad killed the brute," replied Snyder, disgustedly. "Let the railroad look after him. You saw what happened, didn't you?"

"Yes, of course," replied the girl.

"All that happened?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to do my best to make Benson's father settle for the loss of that horse. If it hadn't been for that fool boy's meddling, both the horse and myself would have gotten over the track safely."

Into Della's eyes there flashed a light of great indignation.

"Would you be graceless enough to say such a thing as that?" she gasped.

"It's the truth," muttered Snyder. "The killing of my horse is to be blamed to Ted Benson."

"The saving of your life, you mean!"

"I mean just what I say," retorted Snyder, doggedly. "And I shall rely a good deal upon your testimony, Della, if the matter has to be taken to law."

"You'd better not call me as your witness, George Snyder!"

returned the girl in a tone of contempt. "I would be a bad witness for your side."

Without another word she touched her horse lightly with the riding-whip, starting homeward.

"I'll walk along with you," proposed George Snyder, getting up to walk beside her horse.

"You'll have to prove yourself a good walker, then!" flashed the girl.

She urged her own mount into a trot, then into a canter, and swept onward with never a look at the fellow.

"Now, what on earth has gotten into the girl?" demanded Snyder, halting in dumbfounded surprise.

For three or four minutes after his words to the crowd Ted allowed his young firemen to lounge in the cool shade.

Then he gave the word to resume the march to the fire-house.

Just as he had turned, and was speaking, there came the sharp crack of a fire-arm.

Whizz-zz! chug! A bullet passed one of his ears within an inch, and buried itself in the tree beside which he was standing.

In an instant there was confusion.

"Where did that come from?" quivered Ted, staring around.

But no one seemed to know.

Most of the crowd, in fact, took to its heels and got away from the dangerous spot as rapidly as possible.

The sharp report and its echoes had been so blended and confused that no one felt quite sure from what direction the shot had come.

"Oh, it must have been an accident," came through Tip Marston's bloodless lips.

"I'd like to believe that it was," was Ted Benson's quiet answer.

Chief of Police Brown was soon on the spot.

He questioned everyone who had remained, but no light was shed on the affair.

"Oh, well, back to the fire-house for us," spoke Ted, at last.

His manner did not betray the excitement that raged beneath.

For he felt certain that someone had fired that bullet with deliberate intent and purpose.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MYSTERY OF THE NIGHT.

"I wish I had a lot of money!" breathed Tip Marston, wrathily.

"What wud ye do wid it, av ye had it?" demanded Denny Burke.

"I'd offer the biggest kind of reward to find out who fired that shot at Ted," retorted Tip.

It was after dark, and the young fire-fighters of Freehold had gathered outside the fire-house just because that place made a handy club-house.

"I'll put you on the trail, Tip," smiled Ted, grimly.

"What do you mean, old fellow?"

"Why, just this, Tip. You find the party who had the biggest interest in the stealing of that will this forenoon, and you'll find the party who knows the most about that shot this afternoon!"

"You believe it?" demanded Tip, eagerly.

"Believe it? I might almost say that I know it," affirmed Ted.

"I wish we could find that party," muttered Tom Gerald, who had recovered enough from his burns so that he was able to drag himself around to the fire-house, though he was not back on duty.

"What would you do with him?" demanded Jack Preston.

"Do?" demanded Denny Burke. "Sure, we'd ta-ake him to all the hydrants in town and test the flow av the water on him. Thin we'd ta-ake the scoundrel to the nixt foire and use him to bate the flames out wid!"

Say, a lynching wouldn't be in it with that," agreed Jack, with enthusiasm.

Ted laughed at the nonsense, but none the less his mind clung to the happenings of the day.

"The folks are 'suspecting me of making 'way with the will. Next, they'll be accusing Della Foster of putting me up to it," he groaned. "Oh, there must be some way to find that will, and I must be the one to find it."

As he stood there listening to the aimless chatter of the other young firemen, Ted heard a wagon stop around on the side street.

To his mind there was something stealthy in the way the wagon stopped.

He was on the point of speaking of it to Tip Marston, but thought better of it.

"Pshaw! If I get to guessing every time there's a sound of anything stirring, the fellows will soon think I'm bug-house!" muttered the young fire chief.

Nevertheless, the notion that he would like to investigate that wagon around the corner, and which had not moved since, grew so strong upon him that Ted at last decided to have a look.

Really, he felt uneasy about letting the fellows know what a foolish notion was running through his mind.

So, by degrees, he edged over to the corner of the fire-house.

He stood there, looking on at the group, until he saw that Denny Burke had, at last, drawn the attention of all in the other direction.

Then around the corner vanished Ted.

Yes, there stood the wagon, drawn up to the curb in the dark.

There appeared to be no other human being near it as Ted took in the rig that had caused him so much uneasiness.

Ted went nearer.

A hedge served as fence for the yard in front of which the team had been stopped.

"Bosh! I wonder if I am getting weak-minded, bothering

my head about such an every-day thing as this?" muttered the boy.

Yet he strolled nearer.

He did not recognize the wagon.

In the darkness he bent forward, to peer for a license number or a business name.

Just as Ted bent over, a figure stole through the hedge.

There was the swift movement of a falling arm.

Then Ted toppled forward, curling up in a heap on the sidewalk.

His assailant bent over him for an instant. There was a smell of chloroform as the prowler straightened up partly.

For a few moments that mysterious prowler tugged hard, but at last succeeded in laying the limp boy in the back of the wagon, drawing a canvas over the silent form.

Rumble! The wheels of the wagon began to move slowly, then at a slightly better pace.

From the driver's seat came a satisfied chuckle.

All unheeding of what had happened in hardly more than a hundred yards from them, the young members of Drench One talked on until Tip, some minutes later, turned to refer a question to the young fire chief.

"Why, where is Ted?" asked Tip, in surprise.

"Right there at the corner a minute ago," spoke one of the fellows.

"I thought so. Oh, Ted, where are you?"

There was no answer.

Then two or three of the fellows stepped around the corner, but of course found no sight of their young leader.

Others stepped into the fire-house, and even went upstairs.

It was all a useless search.

"Oh, Ted went off for a little walk," suggested one of the fellows.

"Without saying a word to us?" retorted Tip, indignantly. "Don't you believe it! Ted Benson is too much of a fireman at heart to leave this fire-house without a word."

"Pshaw! Nobody has eaten him."

"Nobody hinted at such a thing," retorted Tip. "But it's certainly strange what has become of Ted."

"Do you suppose he went home?" hinted Jack.

"Without saying good night to any of us? No, sirree!"

"Then, probably he's gone down the street a way, for a stroll, or to buy something that he wanted."

"Perhaps," assented Tip, anxiously. "But I'd feel a heap better if I just knew."

"Why, what harm could happen to Benson?" demanded another of the crew.

"What harm was it that came with an inch of happening to Ted this afternoon?" vented Tip. "What strange thing was it that did happen to the old fellow this morning?"

"Oh, pshaw! He's all right. He'll be back here in a few minutes."

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do," announced Tip, desperately. "I know better than to send you all away from the fire-house. But, Jack, I want you to hurry to Ted's

home and see if he's there. Sam, I want you to run down Main Street and see if you can get on Ted's track. If either of you get any news, hustle back!"

Ted Benson, in the meantime, had lain wholly unconscious in the bottom of the wagon.

Along the quietest streets of the village that driver passed, then out into the farming country beyond.

Finding the bars down at one of the fields, that driver drove in, stopping beside an old barn.

It was an easier matter to get Ted Benson out of the wagon than it had been to get him in.

Fearing that senseless Ted, as he lay on his back on the ground, would rouse, this mysterious person of the night administered more chloroform by means of a bottle and handkerchief.

For some minutes the grewsome spectre of the night sat beside the senseless boy. Every time that Ted seemed likely to rouse a little more of the chloroform was used.

Then, at last, with feverish energy, this prowler went into the barn with Ted's body.

Down came an avalanche of hay over the boy from the loft.

Crackle! A match was sputtering against the woodwork outside.

Chuck! The old wood blazed up over unconscious Ted Benson as the prowler of the night fled away.

CHAPTER VII.

"THIS IS MY FIGHT!"

Clang!

"There goes the alarm, fellows!" cried Tip Marston, starting up.

"And Ted not here," he added, as he rushed into the fire-house.

The fellows were quickly in their places, all except Jack Preston and Sam Howe, who were absent on the search for the young fire chief.

Tip waited patiently until the first round of the alarm was through ringing.

"Twenty-seven!" he shouted. "Come on—make her hum!"

The hand engine went out of the house as fast as it had ever gone.

After it came the truck, with its bulky weight of ladders, its poles, pikes and axes.

The chase led them to the outskirts of the town, and here a man, accompanied by two women and a girl, stood waiting to give the young fireman the word.

"The blaze is over in Page's hollow," bawled the man.

"But Page's hollow hasn't any buildings but an old barn," uttered Tip, who had left the engine to run up to his informant.

"There's a big blaze over that way, just the same. There goes another jet of flame. See it?"

"Thank you."

Tip had been swiftly debating, in his own mind, whether

the rules of the fire department required the youngsters to turn out for a blazing barn.

He concluded, however, to take a chance and answer the summons.

Ted, in the meantime, while his assailant had driven swiftly away in the wagon, had lain under the hay, his nose resting on a handkerchief that smelled of chloroform.

Brightly the woodwork outside blazed up.

Ted coughed with the first gust of smoke that entered his mouth.

The flames had not yet reached the interior of the barn.

They probably would, however.

Cough! wheeze!

The young fire chief, with his strong lungs and fine constitution, was rapidly coming out from under the effects of the chloroform.

Else he might not have coughed.

As it was, he coughed again, and opened his eyes drowsily.

He heard a crackling, smelled smoke and coughed again.

That was enough to pull a born fireman like Benson out of the last of his doze.

Yet he did not spring up.

He merely rolled partly out of the hay.

In doing so, his fingers clutched in the soaked handkerchief.

"There's a fire!" he uttered, stupidly. "Here, Drench One! Play away—lively now! You hook and ladder men, stand at your posts ready to move on the jump!"

As if the last two words had put some energy into his own brain and body, Ted rolled away from the hay and sat up.

He felt the heat of the close flames, though his skin was not badly scorched.

"How on earth did this start?" he muttered, springing to his feet—though he still felt a trifle dizzy from the after-effects of the chloroform.

For the first time he noticed the soaked handkerchief in his hand.

He sniffed at the cloth, then quickly thrust it away in one of his hip pockets.

"There's been something wrong here! What, I wonder?"

But now, his mind coming rapidly out of the trance, he ran around the barn looking for a way out.

One side only was blazing so far.

"Shame to see so much good property go to waste," blazed the boy.

In another twinkling he was hard at work, pulling over the hay on the side of the stack that had fallen against the door, hiding it.

Tearing off huge armfuls of the light-weight stuff, he fell swiftly back with each load, dumping it a few feet from the blaze.

"Wind's blowing the sparks the other way," muttered Ted, whose brain was now working with all the instinct of the youth who saves life and property at all times.

Jangle! clang! clang!

"Why, that's the bell on good old Hook and Ladder—and she's coming this way!" muttered the young fire chief. "How did the fellows hear, I wonder?"

For Ted Benson had been still under the influence of the chloroform in the moments when the alarm was sounding over the town.

"For that matter, how did I come to be here?" wondered Ted.

He worked with new energy in tearing away as much of the hay as he could.

His task was soon over, for he found the door and ran outside.

He could pass the work on to the youths who were coming pounding along the road as faithfully as if responding to a third-alarm call.

Illumined by the blaze, Ted stood and waved his arms to the fellows as soon as the apparatus was near enough.

Several of the fellows—Tip among them—left the apparatus and came racing across the field.

"Ted—that you?"

"Of course it's me."

"But what——"

"I haven't had time to think it out, Tip. Pitch in and bundle hay away as long as there's a chance to save any. The rest of you do the same. Form a line and pass it back from the old barn."

Benson had his hands up to his lips, in place of his trumpet.

"Two of you fellows bring hooks to pull the hay with!" he bellowed.

Within sixty seconds Ted had a score of young fellows at work.

In three minutes more they had done all that could be done.

They had saved rather more than half of the big lot of hay in the barn.

Now, there being no water at hand with which to drench the glowing portions of the burning barn, they jumped in, using their hooks and pikes to pull down the burning boards, and they beat out the flames with their rubber blankets.

"Page will owe us a vote of thanks in the morning for saving him about twenty dollars' worth of hay," gritted Tip. "But, Ted, what on earth happened to you?"

"I've been trying to think that out during the last minute," quoth the young fire chief.

"Then there's some mystery?"

"I guess there must be," Ted laughed, perplexedly. "See here, fellows, I came out of some kind of a trance, to find the barn burning over me. I was tangled up in it some way."

"What are you telling us?" demanded Tip, nervously.

Jack Preston, who had a long, hot run all by himself, came up just in time to hear the answer:

"The truth, Tip, as well as I can remember it. And when I woke up I found this handkerchief under my nose."

He passed the bit of cloth over to his chums.

"Chloroform! Great Scott!" belched Tip.

"See here, fellows, the last I remember, I thought I heard a horse and wagon moving stealthily on the side street by the fire-house. Then the rig stopped. I thought it was queer and I wanted to investigate it. But I thought you fellows would think I was getting dotty, so I watched my chance to slip off when you weren't any of you looking. Well, I came upon the horse and wagon, and remember bending forward to see if I could see any name on the wagon. That's the last I remember."

"Then somebody struck you down from behind!" quivered Tip, indignantly. "Oh, if we could only catch that ruffian! I believe we'd try Denny Burke's programme."

"Sure, Oi'd do it mesilf, and no hilp from anny av ye!" uttered Dinny, savagely.

"The same treatment would do for both of your enemies to-day, Ted, old fellow. In fact, of course they're one and the same."

"Must be," Ted observed drily. "And until to-day, I didn't know that I had even one enemy."

It was a puzzler, indeed, that the young fire-fighters of Freehold had to talk over as they walked back, dragging their apparatus.

By the time the truck and engine had been housed there was a very general movement among the young firemen toward Main Street.

They wanted to get away and talk over the strange news with other townspeople.

"Hold on just a minute, fellows," called Ted. "I've got something to say. This seems to be a night of queer happenings. Until you fellows go home to turn into your beds, I'd advise that you keep within a block or two of the fire-house. Then, if an alarm should come in, you'll be able to get here by the time that the first round of the alarm is in."

Ted, after his griming experiences with the burning barn, remained behind to wash up a bit.

Turning, he saw Tip and Denny Burke standing in the doorway.

"You fellows not going to Main Street?" he asked.

"Not unless you do," Tip answered crisply.

"Oh, I'll be over in a few minutes."

"That'll be about the time we'll get there, too," Tip answered drily.

Ted looked up sharply.

"See here, if you fellows are waiting to escort me over to Main Street, I appreciate it, but I won't have it. I'm not such a cold-foot that I want a bodyguard."

"Seeing what's happened to-day," Tip rejoined, "it won't be a bit out of the way for you to have one."

"You fellows mosey right along," Ted ordered, grinning, though he felt grateful for their attention. "Just remember, please, that I'd feel insulted if you thought I wasn't to be trusted to go one block to Main Street alone."

"We'd rather wait," urged Tip.

"And I'd rather not have you wait. Who wins?"

"Oh, you do, if you're going to come out so strong for it," uttered Tip Marston, half-sulkily.

He turned to glance at Denny Burke. Then, rather reluctantly, this pair of friends started away without their young fire chief.

The startling news of the mysterious attempt on Ted's life had fairly flown up and down Main Street.

George Snyder and two of his friends, Prince Hubbard and Arthur Holwell, stood at the corner as Tip and Denny came softly along.

"Of all the bald, trumpery fakirs!" they heard Snyder utter contemptuously. "Ted Benson did that just to keep the folks talking about him. Mysteriously chloroformed and carried off. Bosh! Perfect rot!"

"It does sound fishy," Hubbard agreed.

"Why, just think over the day's business," went on Snyder. "First, Benson swipes and hides that important will and makes believe it was stolen from him. Then, when he finds it hard to make that story wash, he gets one of his friends to fire a shot that doesn't go within yards of him. And then, fearing that that isn't doing enough, he works this fake about being carried off and set to broil in a burning barn."

"But what's Benson's object in all this?" queried Holwell.

"Just to make the whole thing fit and wash together," retorted George Snyder.

"Do you think he 'lost' that will just to curry favor with Della Foster?"

"Huh! Sure thing! And Della's a fool, or she'd see through such a flimsy fakir as Ted Benson!"

"I guess you've said about enough, Snyder," remarked Tip, in a quiet but dangerous tone, as he stepped forward out of the shadow. "Every word you've uttered was a lie. You're a liar all the way through, and a fool liar at that, without brains enough to invent a lie that sounds straight."

Tip's voice was still quiet, but he was working himself up inside.

"See here, you pup, stop that sort of talk!" cried Snyder, angrily, advancing with clenched fists.

"Oh, don't try to scare me out with a show of fight," warned Tip, coolly. "I want you to fight. In fact, you've got to fight—you skulking liar!"

"Don't say another wurrnd to him, Tip, me bye!" begged Denny Burke, darting in and brushing Marston aside as he himself confronted Ted's slanderer. "Snyder, ye black-hear-rted liar, ye're a thafe as well. Yure father is a liar and a thafe, and wan av the worst shecoundrels aloive. He's the only mumber av yer decayed family thot I know, or Oi'd insult thim all! Now will yez foight, ye dirty, sneaking——"

"Stop!" rang a stern voice behind them, and Ted Benson almost leaped to the front. "This is my fight! No one else can have it!"

George Snyder paled and recoiled as he found himself confronted by this grim-faced, blaze-eyed young fire chief.

"You're all making a heap of fuss about a light re-

mark," quivered Snyder. "What is this—an amateur plot to assassinate me?"

"No, a plot to make you show some decency!" vibrated Ted Benson; "though I'm afraid any such plot as that must fail. There isn't much decency in your worthless carcass. I might treat with contempt what so low and worthless a fellow as you are, Snyder, might say about me. But you've just slandered a young lady who always had every reason to think you her friend."

"Don't drag her name into this," snarled Snyder.

"I don't intend to. It will be you who does, Snyder, if any one. But I hurl the challenge into your teeth! A fight—right now, and to the finish!"

"Do you think I'm afraid of you?" raged Snyder, turning paler, for at heart he was a coward, though, like many cowards, he could be goaded on to a show of bravery.

Besides, he was bigger and presumably stronger than the young fire chief of Freehold.

"Think you're afraid of me?" demanded Ted, tensely. "I don't take the trouble to think. It doesn't cut any figure at all. You've got to fight me, or else stand cowering and take the hardest thumping that I am going to give you!"

"Hurroo!" roared Denny. "The Oirish kings have come t' earth!"

"Come, come!" broke in Prince Hubbard. "This is no time, occasion or place for fighting."

"Keep still, you!" flashed Ted over his shoulder. "This whole affair is with this white-livered cur, Snyder, unless others choose to butt in."

"But don't have a row here on Main Street and disgrace everybody," urged Arthur Holwell.

"No need to," proposed Ted, on the instant. "Down back of the fire-house there's a lot big enough to pull this off in. Come down at once, or before the night is over folks will be talking about Snyder's finking before a challenge that he hadn't the sand to meet."

"Lead the way!" quavered Snyder.

Bowing stiffly, Ted linked his arm through Tip's, and together they wheeled and went back down the side street toward the fire-house.

"Me to come afther yez all and make sure thot nothin' gets away," grinned Denny, dropping to the rear of all.

They were soon in the vacant lot, whither they had gotten without attracting the attention of any others.

Denny pulled off his jacket, rolled up his sleeves and spat on his hands. It was hard for young Burke to realize that this wasn't his own fight. He certainly hoped there would be something doing for him before this social occasion was over.

Ted simply and quietly stripped down to his shirt, tightened his belt a bit around the waist, and stood waiting.

George Snyder's preparations seemed to take longer.

He stripped to his undershirt, which, being sleeveless, showed a pair of very well developed arms.

"Now, gentlemen," began Prince Hubbard, in his most

formal tone, as the two combatants faced each other, "what are to be the rules?"

"We'll just fight until one fellow is either knocked out, or so well licked that he knows it," retorted Ted.

"But the length of the rounds?"

"Let it be all one big round. Are you afraid of that, Snyder?"

"One scheme is as good as another," growled George, sulkily.

"Get ready, then! Look out for yourself!"

Ted aimed a vicious lunge, but that was a feint, only intended to put Snyder on his guard and start the mill at once.

Ted was a little walking bunch of boxing science. Snyder had not been badly taught, but he was rattled at the outset.

He came pounding in, raining blows that Ted, with his nimble footwork, had no trouble in getting away from.

"Don't use your steam all up, Snyder," cautioned young Benson.

"Mind your own business!"

"Oh, all right. But I don't like to see you foolish. It makes it too easy for me."

"Does, eh?" quavered Snyder. "Take that!"

But Ted didn't. He dodged nimbly, and countered, landing thumpingly on Snyder's nose and bringing a spurt.

"That's what I was cautioning you about," observed Ted, coolly, as the two again sparred and watched each other for an opening.

"Shut your mouth!" growled Snyder.

Ted's right landed smackingly on Snyder's lips, again drawing the blood.

Snyder was getting rattled. He backed away, and Ted, resting with his hands on his hips, allowed him to get away.

"That's just to spit out a few teeth, if you have to," mimicked Ted. "I'm not through with you yet."

"Nor I with you!" trembled George Snyder, passionately.

He now came in more blindly than ever.

Thump! biff! Ted led with left and right, closing both Snyder's eyes and sending him to the ground.

"O-o-o-oh!" gulped and groaned the beaten one.

Ted turned coolly to Hubbard.

"Is your man whipped?"

"Doesn't he seem to be?" demanded Hubbard, stiffly.

"He's got to say so, then!"

"Don't carry this thing too far!" warned Hubbard, harshly.

"He's got to say he's whipped, or else get on his feet again."

"We won't allow that," quivered Hubbard, turning to his friend Holwell.

"You'll find you've got nothing to say about allowing it," broke in Tip, sharply.

"Whoop!" from Denny, as he spat on his hands again.

"Snyder," insisted Ted, turning to his vanquished slan-

derer, "either say that you've had enough, or stand up for another try. And I won't repeat this demand. If you're not prompt I'll wipe the ground with you."

"Oh! I've got enough!" wailed Snyder, as he saw Ted's feet moving his way.

"Then get up and go into the fire-house to tidy up," advised Benson, himself lifting Snyder to his feet.

As he did so, our hero whispered in the other's ear:

"Don't forget, either, what brought this on you!"

Denny Burke was trembling with something very much like despair.

"This can't be all!" he rasped. "It ain't over so soon! For the love of hiven, some wan pull me nose!"

But Denny's request failed to set anything more doing.

CHAPTER VIII.

"THEY'VE DONE FOR HIM."

That was the end of notable happenings for that night. But the next day Freehold had its fill of exciting topics. The further story of Ted's near call to death in the barn was going the rounds.

While some of the townspeople felt inclined to smile a bit at that, the great majority of folks knew Ted Benson well enough to be sure that he was not a liar.

Then, too, of course, the story of Ted's fight with George Snyder got around.

It was even known that Snyder was not showing himself upon the street to-day, but that a druggist had gone up to the Snyder house, presumably to "paint out" a pair of black eyes for the unhappy young man.

Naturally, what George felt sorest about was the new attitude of Della Foster.

For a year or more he had felt absolutely sure of her as his girl.

Her turning upon him yesterday had been marked by something still more plain to-day.

From a window, through his more than half-closed eyes, Snyder had seen Della walk by into the village and home again.

Neither time did she even look at the windows of the Snyder place.

"Of course she's heard that I got laid up," muttered the young fellow. "I wonder why she doesn't run over a minute or send some message? Can she be in earnest about giving me the shake?"

Ted Benson did not have even the pleasure of seeing Della from a distance.

She had been very kind to him, and he appreciated it, but he did not intend to force himself on the notice of a girl in Miss Foster's wealthy class.

Much of the time through the day Ted spent in trying to puzzle out the meaning of the two attempts on his life.

"It has something to do with the stealing of that will, and it must come from some one who is afraid that I may get on the right track," he mused. "But who is the party? Blessed if I can think of a soul who'd do such a thing!"

It was such a puzzle, in fact, that a whole day of thinking over it brought him no nearer to the truth.

"Call it a mystery, and let it go at that," he said smilingly to Tip, as the two met at the fire-house that night.

They were the first two arrivals.

"Let nothing go," murmured Tip, indignantly. "All I'm waiting for is the first sign of a clue. But it's that first clue that I can't get, nor even imagine."

"Same case here," sighed Ted. "I've been thinking about it until I got tired of the puzzle. I've got a new way of getting over the difficulty."

"What's that?" Tip asked wonderingly.

"I'm going to call the whole thing a bad dream, and let it go at that."

"That'll never satisfy me," grumbled Marston. "Say, do you think George Snyder could have had anything to do with it?"

Ted shook his head.

"Not for a minute," he replied.

"But Snyder hates you like poison."

"Maybe, but he hasn't the brains to think up anything deep, nor the courage to carry out a bold scheme."

Tip remained silent, looking down the street and watching the approach of Jack Prescott and Denny Burke, together.

One by one, and sometimes by twos and threes, most of the other fellows of Drench One dropped around.

The evening being warm, they had brought down settees from the hall above and sat around in the spacious fire-yard.

"Say, this is a great place to meet nights," observed Jack.

"It is, in summer," smiled Ted.

"But in winter it'd be all right, too. There's a big heater upstairs, and a roomy hall."

"The dream is not for us," sighed Tip. "Almost any day the regular fire department will be back, and then we retire to the background, lucky if the town government thinks even to give us a vote of thanks."

"Wouldn't it be jolly," proposed Sam Howe, "if we could only get the town to provide quarters for a regular boy's company in the fire department?"

"Wouldn't it be fine if we could all inherit a million?" mocked Tom Gerald.

But that word "million" seemed too close a reference to the stolen will.

The fellows, most of them, shot warning looks at Gerald, who quickly bit his tongue.

"Wonder if we'll have one more good fire before the grown-ups get back and kick us out?" yawned Jack behind his hand.

Then the boys were silent, most of them glum, for they had grown wonderfully to love this fascinating life of the fireman.

"What time is it?" asked some one, finally.

"Quarter-past nine."

"I'm going home soon, then."

"Can't the chickens get along without you?" jeered Jack. At the mention of bed, on this warm, dull evening, several of the fellows began to yawn.

Ted, whose thoughts were much too active to allow him to think of sleep, rose, stretched and strolled down to the curb.

At the curb, right in front of the fire-house, was one of the town's street lamps.

The light streamed down on Ted as he stood there, erect, and wearing his helmet jauntily.

"Isn't he a fine-looking fellow?" whispered Jack to Tip, and nodding toward their young chief. "Say, he looks just like a soldier, or—or——"

"Or a fireman," finished Tip, drily. "That's just what he is—a fireman from his soles to the crown of his head!"

Crack! The report was so near and so loud that it made Freehold's young firemen jump.

In another instant their excitement was changed to horror.

For they saw Ted Benson spin around, reel and fall to the pavement.

It seemed as if every fellow jumped at once, but Tip was the first to reach his fallen chum.

Ted's helmet had dropped off as he fell.

From a hole in the center of the top of his forehead the blood trickled.

"Whoever the villains are," vibrated Tip, "they've done for him this time!"

CHAPTER IX.

A DOUBLE TRAGEDY?

Swift as thought Tip Marston straightened up.

His face was white, his eyes dry and tearless.

"Jack," he panted, "you and Sam streak it in two different directions. See which can get a doctor here first! You fellows"—pointing to four others—"get Ted into the house and make him as comfortable as you can."

Tip leaped to his feet.

"The rest of you follow me—and sprint!"

He was running by the time that the words left his mouth.

Followed by those who had not other duties, Marston rushed straight for the corner left below, from which the shot had come.

"If we can catch the scoundrel," panted Tip, "we may furnish ourselves with some practice in lynching."

But down at the corner below all was quiet, and no one else in sight, save the widow who lived in the nearest house.

She, with her window up, was tremulously demanding what the shooting meant.

But Tip, who could not suspect this woman of the cowardly deed, only snorted, as he called out:

"Some of you run straight on. The rest of you follow me to Main Street!"

Yet, prompt as the pursuit had been, and swift as the chase was, the person who had fired that shot had succeeded in losing himself.

The only result of the frantic inquiries of the young firemen was to gather a crowd that grew every minute.

Almost at once the crowd began to throng toward the fire-house, for a shooting was no usual thing in Freehold.

The little town was excited to the utmost.

In the meantime, Ted Benson, according to Tip's orders, had been taken into the fire-house and made as comfortable as possible on a pile of blankets.

Bert Allen knelt over him, while three other young firemen stood sorrowfully by.

"Fellows," murmured Bert, "he seems to be breathing yet."

Ted opened his eyes.

He looked at the quartette wonderingly, then asked:

"What's the row?"

"Don't you know, old fellow?" asked Bert, in a hushed voice.

Ted sat up.

"Here, don't do that!" protested Bert, while one of the other fellows knelt behind Benson's back, supporting him.

"Why not?" queried Ted.

"Don't you know, old fellow? You—you've been—shot through the brain!"

"Shot—what?" echoed Ted, in bewilderment. "Go on, Bert! Don't talk foolish!"

"But you have," persisted Allen, holding the young chief up as Ted got to his feet somewhat weakly.

"But you have been shot," protested Bert, in a scared tone. "I wish you'd lie down again, old fellow, until the doctor gets here."

There was a rush of wheels and hoofs out in the street.

Then a buggy stopped outside, and Jack, leaping to the ground, cried:

"Hurry up, doc! I want you to tell us whether there's any chance."

Young Dr. Tisdale came hurrying in, but stopped short in amazement, as did Jack, at the sight of Ted stepping forward to meet him.

"What's up, doc?" smiled young Benson. "The fellows are trying to persuade me that I'm dead."

"I was given to understand the same thing," the doctor retorted drily. "What's that blood on your forehead, anyway?"

The physician stepped forward, anxiously examining the bleeding spot.

"What did he have on his head at the time he was shot?" demanded the physician.

"His helmet," Jack replied promptly.

"Let me see it."

Dr. Tisdale took the helmet, examining it carefully, then looking back at the spot on Ted's forehead.

"Well, I don't blame you youngsters for being fooled," laughed the doctor, and at that laugh every one present felt better.

"What was the trouble?" asked Jack.

"See this hole in the front of the helmet, and also in the back?" pursued the doctor, holding up the headgear.

"Now, if you note the positions of the holes, it will be quite plain to you that the bullet must have passed nearly two inches above your young foreman's head."

"Then how about that blood-spot?" persisted Jack.

"See this unevenness, this roughness in the seam of the sweat-band in the helmet?" Dr. Tisdale asked. "Now, when a bullet travels it goes with tremendous force. This helmet is made of tough material, too. So the bullet in tearing its way through the helmet would do so pretty roughly—with a big shock, in fact. Now, when that shock came this lump in the sweat-band was forced back against Benson's forehead so that it struck him a really savage blow in the forehead. It also broke the skin and brought the blood."

"Then I'm still alive?" asked Ted, smiling quizzically.

"To the best of my belief, you are," laughed the doctor. Then he added, more seriously:

"But you had a mighty close escape, Benson. You came very near being killed. It was a scoundrelly shot, and the fellow who fired it meant to do for you!"

"A miss is as good as a mile, I've heard," quoth Ted, lightly and coolly.

Then he sat down, for he was still rather weak from the effect of the stunning.

By this time a very fair-sized crowd had gathered in front of the fire-house.

Some one, however, took the trouble to run to Main Street with the news.

That brought the young firemen, most of them, back on the run.

"It's the biggest puzzle in the world," muttered Tip Marston, savagely. "We lost hardly a second in getting off after the scoundrel, but we couldn't catch sight even of the shadows of his coat-tails."

"Has it been reported to Chief Brown?" asked some one.

"Of course it has," retorted Tip. "But this is the third attempt to kill Ted Benson, and the police haven't caught any one yet. I'm beginning to feel disgusted with the way police catch crooks."

"Something will have to be done mighty soon," murmured Dr. Tisdale, "to catch the——"

Clang!

Every one jumped.

Ted, too, was quickly on his feet, looking at the automatic alarm.

"Get to your posts, fellows, like lightning!" ordered Foreman Benson.

"Are you going, too?" asked Dr. Tisdale.

"Of course I am," flashed Ted. "I command this company."

"Then come with me," ordered the doctor, taking firm hold on Ted's arm. "I'll take you there in my buggy. You don't want to try to run yet."

Ted was in the buggy beside the doctor, while the rest of the crew had engine and truck in the street by the time that the first round of the alarm had come in.

"Thirty-three—and run like the mischief!" cried Ted, hoarsely.

Then he settled back, white and trembling, as Dr. Tisdale brought the lash down on the flanks of the horse.

"That box is the nearest one to Mr. Foster's home," gasped the boy, as they rode on through the night. "Does this mean some new rascality—another mystery of the night?"

"What do you mean?"

"Has the same person, or persons, tried to destroy Mr. Foster's house?"

Dr. Tisdale, who knew all the local happenings of the last two or three days, was silent for some moments.

Then he answered:

"We shall soon know what to think."

The physician was driving as fast as he could, trying to get to the scene as far as possible in advance of the apparatus.

As the horse turned down the street on which the box was located, Ted cried out, in great excitement:

"You see, it is the Foster house! It's on the top floor, too—the fourth story!"

"That would be a queer place for a firebug to get to work," muttered Tisdale.

"Nevertheless, it may be the work of a firebug."

Ted was whiter than ever, gripping the edges of the seat as the doctor drove furiously into the Foster grounds.

As they drove up at a gallop, Ted caught sight of Mr. and Mrs. Foster and the servants out in the yard, running excitedly about.

"Della! Della! Some one find Della!" shouted Mr. Foster, white-haired and feeble, who was running about anxiously as Ted sprang down from the buggy.

"Isn't your daughter out with the rest?" quivered Ted, as he raced to the old man's side.

"We can't find her!"

"Papa! papa! Here I am!" hailed a voice from a window on the fourth story. "The stairs are blazing and I can't get down!"

"Keep as cool as you can, Miss Foster. We'll get you out safely!" Ted bellowed up, but his voice shook. "Stay right there at the window, where you can get air!"

Then Ted turned to race into the house. Though he did not know it at the moment, Dr. Tisdale was close behind him, while old Mr. Foster brought up a faltering rear.

His heart thumping, Ted gained the third floor of the house.

He stood at the bottom of the stairs leading upward.

They were blazing. That stairway was a roaring furnace.

"Firebugs, sure!" panted Dr. Tisdale, behind him. "Smell the coal oil in the smoke!"

Ted turned with a sickened heart away from the blazing staircase.

"Where are the other stairs to the next floor?" he demanded of Della's father, who had just reached them.

"This is the only staircase, Benson."

"Then we can do no good here. We must use the ladders!" faltered Ted, as he wheeled.

Down the stairs he raced, while Dr. Tisdale stayed behind to help the anguished father down.

As Ted gained the open air, he heard, with a thrill of thankfulness, the jangling bell of Drench One as it turned into the grounds at the gateway.

"Hustle, Drench!" the young fire chief roared through his trumpet. "There's big work to be done here!"

Next he turned his trumpet toward the high window at which the white-faced girl cowered.

"We'll reach you like lightning, Miss Foster!"

The girl waved her hand back silently to show that she heard.

Then Dr. Tisdale appeared, supporting Mr. Foster.

"Tip," roared the young chief, "get that hose coupled like lightning. Run into the house, up to the third story! Play like mad on the fire that you'll find on the stairs. Jack, the hook and ladder has to play the biggest part here—the saving of a precious life! You and the fellows get off the longest ladder in the shortest time you know how to do it!"

All was coolness as these young heroes worked, obeying every order as soon as it was uttered.

But Ted, glancing upward with a sinking heart, saw the smoke bursting out below the window at which Della huddled.

"If we don't get her down from there soon the smoke and hot air will kill her," groaned Ted, his knees threatening to give way under him in his anguish.

The longest ladder was off and being rushed toward the house.

With desperate energy Ted helped to run it up the side of the house.

Then the young firemen looked at each other, ready to groan.

For the ladder was still some feet short of reaching near enough to that window to be of service.

"Run up the truck!" shouted Ted, hoarsely. "We'll try to stand the ladder on that!"

Then, seeing that Tip had the hose coupled and ready, Benson roared:

"Polemen, pikemen and axemen, follow the hose. Work like fiends!"

Old Mr. Foster, followed by his sobbing, reeling wife, tottered close to Ted.

"Save my daughter! Bring Della down alive to me!" he sobbed, "and you shall have any reward you name!"

"I'd save any life that could be saved," Ted uttered hoarsely, "but your daughter's twenty times over!"

Then he leaped forward to take charge of placing the truck.

Almost in a twinkling it was in place.

Then, slowly, for it was ticklish work, the great ladder was lifted so that its bottom ends rested on the platform of the truck.

"Is it steady?" asked some one, quickly.

"No time to guess about that," uttered Ted, as he snatched up his rubber coat and drew it on.

Then, stooping once more, he snatched up two rubber blankets.

Tongues of flame were spurting out around the ladder as Ted glanced swiftly upward.

"Bring Della down with you!" quavered the old man. "Any reward! Any reward at all!"

"I sha'n't come down alone, at all events!" gritted Ted.

Then he started his nimble run up the ladder.

All went well until he reached a point just above the third floor.

Here the tongues of flame leaped out at him.

"He can't make it!" groaned Jack Preston.

They watched, shudderingly, as Ted leaped upward through the first line of fire.

The flames beat against his stout rubber coat.

By a miracle only, as it seemed, did his feet, unprotected by rubber, escape being licked up by the scorching tongues of red.

But he had yet another zone of fire to go through on the upward climb.

Those below shuddered, and many turned their eyes away.

Were those who peered upward through the smoke and flame destined to witness a double tragedy?

CHAPTER X.

TED DECLARES HIMSELF AMID THE FLAMES.

Ted Benson himself felt the hopelessness of it all as he neared the second line of flames.

Yet it was all over in a second, and he passed through, the fire beating against stout rubber.

One of his feet got slightly scorched by one short jet of flame, but it did not cripple him.

And now he was at the top of the ladder.

It did not reach to the sill, yet it carried the young life-saver's hands to the sill.

"Stand back!" he cried, and tossed the rubber blankets up and in.

Then drawing himself up by sheer strength, he stood in the room, face to face with the girl.

The room was a studio, with a skylight overhead.

It was a room in which the girl often painted, and was her den in general.

"You have taken a terrible risk!" she shuddered.

"Risk is the firemen's lot," replied Ted, as he gripped one of her hands lightly, then turned swiftly back to the window.

"Come here to the window with me, and keep here," he commanded.

There was no time for explaining.

All around them the fumes were beginning to be stifling.

Even if Tip and his nozzlemen were making any progress in the hall below against the actual flames, their stream of water was at the same time adding to the fumes.

As Ted looked down and saw the flames bursting out below, thicker and heavier than ever, he could not repress the anguished groan:

"We can never go down through that now!"

"Oh, why did you come up here to save me?" groaned the girl, wringing her hands.

"Why?" asked Ted, hoarsely. "Well, for one thing, because I'm a fireman."

"I heard you say that we cannot get down through the flames."

"Honestly, Della, I believe we would be roasted alive in the effort."

"Two lives to be lost, when only one needed to be sacrificed!" shuddered the girl. "Oh, why—why—did you come up here?"

"Della," he mumbled in a strange voice, "shall I tell you the greatest reason for my coming up here?"

"What?" asked the girl, wonderingly.

"Because I love you! If I can't get you down to the ground safely, then I'm ready to perish here with you."

"You—you——"

"I love you, Della," finished the boy promptly. "There, now you know it. If it had not been for this certainty of death right before us you never would have heard this."

A strange little cry broke through the girl's lips.

Ted did not understand until one of her hands sought his and rested on it.

He turned to look at her in amazement.

"Della!" he gasped, "do you mean that—that—you——"

"I never knew it until this moment," she nodded, tears that were not of terror shining in her eyes.

Foolish as it may have been, trembling Ted Benson straightened up, drew back from the window, and drew the girl after him, both his arms around her now.

"Della," he quivered, "since we can't get out of here alive, it—it can do no harm."

She understood him, nor, in that awful moment, did she even pretend that she did not.

Her lips met his, frankly and freely; her arms pressed him.

Thus they stood, forgetful of all for the moment.

But then, with a hoarse cry of despair, Ted Benson darted back to the window, once more drawing the girl with him.

Down into the flames and the smoke he peered, his eyes smarting.

"Jack!" he shouted frenziedly.

"Hullo!" came Preston's voice through the trumpet.

"Send for Tip and the hose. Try to play around the ladder."

"I've just sent for him!" bellowed back Jack. "Here comes the hose now!"

There was a hoarse, stifled cheer from the crowd as four of the young fire-fighters appeared, dragging the lengths of hose around the corner of the building.

For a crowd, at such an awful moment, will grasp at any hope.

"Any orders?" came up Jack's strident voice through the trumpet.

"Yes; play all over the flames, and let me see how it goes."

Tip himself was number one at the nozzle as the stream came swishing and swirling against the black and red mass of death below the window.

Yet to the anguished ones looking on it looked plainly like a drawn battle between fire and its destroyer.

Ted watched in anguish for a few seconds.

Then again he shouted, while the crowd below stood hushed, that his voice might carry better.

"Jack!"

"On deck here!"

"Have the hose play against me, strong and heavy, as soon as you see me on the ladder!"

"Aye, aye, chief!"

"And play the stream on me and on Miss Foster all the way down the ladder!"

"Aye, aye, chief—and God be with you!"

Ted himself was wordlessly uttering a prayer as he turned to the girl.

She was calm now, ready to die if that came to be her lot.

For just one instant Ted drew her head back so that those below could not see.

He kissed her again, then began to wrap one of the rubber blankets around the upper part of her body.

"Hold this tightly around you when we get on the ladder," he begged.

"Yes—dear!"

"And I shall wrap the other around you as you come into my arms. Remember to keep your mouth shut, and don't even breathe through your nose if you can help it."

"I understand, Ted."

"Now, be ready, sweetheart!"

Ted's own face looked brave as he stepped through the window.

The truth was, he believed there was not one chance in ten for them.

He was out upon the ladder now.

Della crouched on the window-sill.

"Come!" he called.

Cautiously, as if she understood, even in that awful moment, the penalty of a false step, she lowered herself.

Then she felt her hero's strong arms around her body.

He drew her down, wrapping the lower part of her body in the other rubber blanket.

Swirl! came the stream against them.

"There's one chance in a thousand now," whispered Ted in her ear as she lay on one of his arms, while his other hand grasped the rung of the ladder. "If we don't get through—good-bye, Della!"

"Good-bye, dear!"

Then he started downward.

Below, the crowd caught its breath as it saw the two young people pass through the first line of fire.

Then what a cheer went up!

For Ted was safely through the second line of fire—safely, as far as those below could see.

Yet, as he went through, the young fire chief realized that the ladder itself was steaming hotly.

Now, indeed, the cheering became almost frantic.

For Ted, taking his time, was slowly coming down the rest of the ladder, with Della nestling on his arm, both her arms around his neck, her face close against his.

And so they reached the truck's platform, where a half-dozen young firemen leaped to their assistance.

"Mr. Foster!" cried Ted Benson.

"Aye, lad!" came the old man's hoarse, joyful shout, as Della stood forth from the blankets, one of her hands holding to Ted's.

"Here's your daughter, safe, sir."

"And all I've got can never repay you!" sobbed the old man, joyously, as some one helped Della down to the ground, and her father and mother clasped the girl in their arms.

Then they turned to Benson.

But Ted was not there. The life-saver had become the fireman again, and there was a costly building to be saved.

"How's the blaze inside?" our hero demanded, rushing over to Tip.

"We were getting it fairly well under when Jack sent for us."

"Then keep on playing here, on the outside. I'll go inside."

Jack, in the meantime, was superintending the work of getting the ladder down.

It came down just in time to save it from catching and being destroyed.

"Friends," shouted Ted, turning to the crowd, "help our fellows to form the bucket line upstairs. Come on—all who'll help!"

There was a rush to follow the young fire chief.

Twenty minutes of desperate work got the flames under inside. It took the bucket brigade, backed by axe, pole and pike, and all under the sturdy direction of Ted Benson.

But at last the fire was out; the damage to this costly mansion amounted to hardly a thousand dollars.

Going outside, Ted stepped over to Mr. Foster, who, turning, gripped at both his hands eagerly.

"I believe I can assure you, sir, that the fire is out, and that your home is saved, although damaged," announced the young fire chief.

"What do you suppose I care about the home?" quivered the old man. "My family are saved—that's the only news that counts."

"That blaze was set by a firebug," Ted went on. "But how could it have happened?"

"We were sitting out on the porch, and the servants were all out at the side of the house," broke in Mrs. Foster, tremulously. "A firebug could have crept in through one of the entrances. It was easy enough for him to get upstairs and do his fiendish work. And not fifteen minutes before the fire was discovered, Della tells me, she went up to her studio on the top floor to look over some things she had there."

"Then the firebug must have been watching. He saw her go inside, and formed his purpose in a jiffy," breathed Ted.

But he spoke to himself, and this other thought was running through his mind:

"For some reason that I can't make out, the wretch who tried to shoot me down was the same who set that fire. I can't understand it at all, but it is all connected with the mystery surrounding that stolen will."

Della, seeing that Ted had left her parents, walked quickly to him, touching him on the arm.

Ted turned, a look of torment in his eyes.

"Did you—did you tell my parents what you said to me—up in the studio?" she inquired tremulously, her eyes glistening as she looked at him.

"Why—why—no, Della," Ted responded with an effort.

"You have my permission to tell them as soon as you wish, Ted," replied the girl, in her simple, straightforward way.

"Why, why, Della—you don't think—you don't imagine I'm going to take advantage of what was said then—when we both thought we were in death's grasp?" choked the young fire chief.

"Were you—were you deceiving me, then?" gasped Della, drawing quickly back, her face flushing with shame.

"Deceiving you——"

Clang!

It was the fire-alarm, sounding another call for the village.

Ted Benson had to jump at the call of duty.

Yet, first of all, he turned to say a brief word to this girl who had meant more than life to him.

"Deceiving you?" he repeated. Della——"

But the girl had vanished.

Running to the nearest clump of shrubbery, she stood behind it, panting, one hand clutching over her heart.

CHAPTER XI.

A MADMAN ON THEIR HANDS.

Clang!

Duty's calls were coming fast to-night.

A fireman's first duty is to fight fire.

Even with Della's cruel words ringing in his ears, Ted Benson had to think first of all of his work.

He turned, darting over to the apparatus, and giving orders that resulted in the quick getting ready of the apparatus.

"Forty-two!" breathed Ted, as the first round of the alarm came in.

"Main Street," clicked Dr. Tisdale. "That's near my home. So jump into the buggy and I'll drive you to the new fire. Whew! but they're coming fast to-night."

Ted sprang into the buggy, but asked the doctor to wait until the apparatus had started.

That happened in good record time, though Freehold's

young fire-fighters were beginning to feel the wear and tear of the night.

Then Ted was whirled into town.

On Main Street a little crowd had already gathered before a building in which fire had been discovered.

"The flames are coming out of a back window on the second floor, chief," reported one of the citizens to Ted.

"Flames?" echoed our hero.

"Well, smoke, I mean."

"What room is it? And why has no one gone in?"

The citizen told him where the room was, adding:

"And no one went in because the door is locked tight."

"We'll soon attend to the door! Follow me!" commanded young Benson.

With a dozen citizens at his heels, he raced up the long flight of stairs.

There was little trouble in locating the room, for already smoke was pouring out around the sides of the door.

Calling to two of the more powerful-looking men in the crowd, Benson asked them to hurl themselves, with him, against the door.

The third assault broke the door down.

The wall, a wooden mantel and part of the floor were burning.

It was too much of a blaze to fight without water and tools, so Ted sprang back to the door.

"We'll get that out in a jiffy when Drench One gets here," uttered Ted, in the hallway.

There he stood, with the citizens who had followed him, until the jangling of good old Drench One's bell was heard.

"Run down and tell Tip Marston that we need the water and some axes up here," begged Ted, turning to one of the men.

Soon Tip was on the spot.

Standing in the doorway, he heavily drenched the burning spots.

"Now come on, axemen," ordered Ted.

He pointed to the wooden wall, charred and still smoking.

"Rip things away there!" he ordered. "There may be some fire behind those boards. One, two, three—smash!"

"Stop!" screamed an agonized voice from the doorway.

An old man, his long hair flying wildly, his eyes glaring, stood framed in the doorway.

"Take those axes away with you!" he shouted frantically. "I forbid you to chop here. Away—all of you, or you shall know the meaning of my wrath!"

"Go on chopping," said Ted, calmly. "Keep it up until you find that there's no spark behind the walls."

"Stop!" shrieked the old man, rushing to Bert Allen, the nearest of the axemen, and pushing that youth back.

"He's the queer old codger who lives in this room," explained one of the citizens.

"Jack, lead this excited old gentleman out of the way," commanded Ted.

But the old man nimbly dodged away from Preston, then hurled himself against the wall.

He stood there, that old man, glaring at the axemen, who stood ready to demolish as much of the wall as might be necessary.

Ted Benson realized the fact that he had a madman on his hands.

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

"Jack," ordered the young chief, "you and Sam Howe get hold of the old chap and take him out of the room. Be careful that you don't hurt him."

"Don't you dare touch me!" shrieked the wild-eyed man, as Preston and Howe approached him.

"You'll have to step outside for a few minutes, uncle," replied Jack, and laid a strong hand on the madman.

"I won't, I tell you!" came the screaming answer.

"Oh, suppose we go outside and talk it over?" urged Jack.

Sam had caught hold of the madman at the other side.

Easily, for the excited old man was light of weight, they lifted him and bore him, despite his struggling, kicking and clawing, out into the hallway.

"Rip away that wall now," Ted directed.

Under the sharp, pinging blows of the axes the wall boards came away in a jiffy.

"Why, what's this?" cried Tip, darting forward and snatching up a long envelope that was revealed in its hiding-place behind the partition.

He examined it by the light of his fireman's lantern.

"What's this?" gasped Tip.

Then, in a tornado of excitement, he blew out:

"Ted! Ted! This envelope is labeled 'Last Will and Testament of George P. Eastman'!"

"What's that?" choked our hero, leaping forward and snatching at the envelope as a wail came from the captive madman outside.

"You found it! You found it again! I feared you would!" shrieked the maniac. "But it shall bring you nothing but ill luck and despair—as it has already come near to costing you your life!"

"Oho!" quavered Ted. "So you are the gentleman who shot at me, who tried to burn me up in a barn, and who set the fire at Mr. Foster's to-night?"

"What of it?" quavered the old maniac. "You can't punish me! You can't stop me! My deeds are ordered by heaven itself! And I am one of the relatives, one of the defrauded heirs of George Eastman. Yes, I stole the will from your pocket, thinking to save myself a share of the fortune, but——"

Here the maniac checked himself swiftly, leering cunningly.

"How did you know it was the will that I had in my pocket?" demanded Ted.

"I saw the lawyer make the mistake in picking up the wrong envelope to hand to you. But you have not beaten me!" cried the old man shrilly. "I shall triumph yet. I

was not born to die a poor man! I shall beat you all yet, and you, Benson, shall yet die for your interference."

The old man made a desperate effort to break away from those who were holding him.

But Jack and Sam held on stiffly.

"What's this I feel in his clothes?" demanded Jack, suddenly, and made a dive.

In a twinkling he had flashed up an automatic gun, little longer than a belt revolver, yet having a magazine of cartridges and all the penetrative power of a bigger rifle.

"That's the weapon the shooting was done with!" vented Tip, then breathed a sigh of great relief at realizing that now, with this maniac safely locked up, all danger to his chum would be past.

"This is some one you want, I guess, chief," said Ted, as Mr. Brown, head of the Freehold police department, came up the stairs.

It was quickly explained to the police official just why he should be interested in this queer old man.

As soon as he was down on the sidewalk, Ted sent one of his fellows on the run for Lawyer Southcomb, who soon arrived, out of breath.

"Come in here, Benson," urged the lawyer, leading the way to a drug store. "I see this envelope has been opened by that maniac, so we may as well look at the contents."

As the lawyer drew out the will and looked it over, a queer smile came into his face.

"That poor maniac really is, I believe, a relative of the late Mr. Eastman," explained the lawyer. "I didn't know it, though, until I talked with Chief of Police Brown just now. It seems that the maniac has been talking about himself. He's a crazy fellow whom Mr. Eastman paid to have taken care of for life. But this poor old man, Merrill, escaped from the asylum a few days ago. He came right here, convinced that he would have a chance to get hold of a will that would leave him a rich man. Just before he escaped, Merrill stole a lot of money from the desk of the superintendent of the asylum. Yet this same Merrill was crafty enough to dress himself in the poorest of clothes, so as not to attract attention to himself. And so he watched his chance and stole the will as it left my office in your pocket. Poor Merrill! Little good this will would do him!"

"Why?" asked Ted.

"Well, the first will left a million to Miss Della Foster, and another million to be divided among the distant relatives of Mr. Eastman. This second will, which was reputed to leave out the million to Miss Foster, leaves her two millions instead."

Ted gasped. The room seemed to whirl around him.

"And I came near engaging myself to that lucky girl!" he gasped. "We were engaged, in fact. I suppose we still are, but Della will find that I haven't the cheek to try to hold her to anything of the sort."

Lawyer Southcomb folded up the will and placed it carefully in his pocket.

"So that now Miss Foster becomes heiress to about two

million dollars," went on the man of the law. "No wonder that poor lunatic, Merrill, hid this will behind the wall after he had read it. He saw that it would be better to stand under the first will than under this one."

"But Merrill, being a lunatic, couldn't inherit and handle the money, anyway, could he?" asked our hero.

"Did you ever see a lunatic," questioned the lawyer, smiling, "who realized that he was crazy? Merrill undoubtedly believes that he's the sanest man in this State to-day."

"And so, in his crazy way, he tried to destroy me after he had heard me declare that I would find a way to recover the stolen will," murmured Ted, thoughtfully. "And it was—must have been—from a front window in that same lodging-house that he fired at me yesterday."

"Be comforted," smiled the lawyer. "He'll never fire at you again if the asylum people do their duty."

Ted heaved a great sigh.

"Of course, I'll have to get a horse and buggy and go out to see the Fosters at once," rattled on the lawyer. "You'll come, too."

"No," answered Ted.

"You'd better think again," smiled the lawyer. "You've been a hero out there to-night, and you'll be a hero again when you show up with this wonderful will."

By the time that they reached the Benson home Southcomb had succeeded in persuading our hero to go along with him to the Fosters.

Though it was rather late, the Fosters, on account of the evening's excitement, were still up.

Della had risen rather hastily when she saw who the callers were.

Her face was flushing, and she started to retreat hastily.

But Ted met her face to face, at a little distance from the others.

"Won't you give me a moment?" he asked pleadingly.

Della hesitated; then, without a word, turned and walked to the farther end of the porch.

There she halted, facing him.

"Della," began the boy, "that was an awkward thing that happened to-night."

"Very awkward," she admitted stiffly.

"You accused me of deceiving you."

"At least, you betrayed me into admitting that I loved you," rejoined the girl, her eyes on the flooring of the porch.

"But, Della, I didn't imagine that we'd either of us get out of that alive. So I didn't see the harm, then, of telling you how I loved you."

"Loved me then?" she asked.

"Then and all the time, Della. But now you see how hopeless it is. You are a great heiress—I a boy without a penny."

"Is money all there is in the world?" asked the girl, still looking down.

"What's this?" asked a third voice.

Mr. Foster had come upon them unseen.

He looked at both the young people keenly for a moment. Then that wise old gentleman began to understand how matters lay. He questioned them directly. Ted told the whole story with manly directness.

"Benson, you're quite right," announced Mr. Foster. "But do you remember that to-night I offered you any reward in my power for saving my daughter? That reward shall come in the shape of enough of the world's goods to make you feel independent. Besides that, I shall see you well started in a prosperous business. Now, are you going to slight my daughter, after having won her love?"

Ted could not answer at first. A great sob choked up in his chest.

"Della," said her father, "don't blame Ted Benson. Honor him, instead, for feeling the way that he did. He loves you, and one of these days he shall be in a position to claim you. The engagement has my full consent, and I am sure that it will have your mother's. That's all, for the present. Now, you two young people take a stroll under the trees while I talk with the lawyer."

Ted is, indeed, a prosperous man in these days, and he has claimed and wedded Della Foster.

George Snyder saw little to hold him in Freehold after that. He is abroad in the world, somewhere.

Tip Marston is a partner of Ted's in these days.

Jack Preston is manager of a big mill that the partners own, while Denny Burke has found his place as their master machinist.

Several of the other fellows of old Drench One, and afterward of Niagara One, have found berths in Ted's business.

Merrill is still safely confined.

He will never cause any more trouble for young Mr. and Mrs. Ted Benson, who are about the happiest young couple that can be found on this lively old earth.

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